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## William Bradford

c. 1589-c. 1657

**Occupation:** Pilgrim

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## BIOGRAPHICAL ESSAY

Bradford, William, 1589-1657 (1589/90 - May 9/19, 1657), Pilgrim Father, was born at Austerfield, Yorkshire, into a family of substantial yeomen. His father, William Bradford (d. 1591), married Alice Hanson, daughter of the village shopkeeper, June 21/31, 1584. Their third child and only son, the future governor, was baptized at the parish church in Austerfield March 19/29, 1589/90 (*Mayflower Descendant*, VII, 65, IX, 115-17). His mother married again in 1593, after which he was brought up by his grandfather and uncles to follow the plow. The people of that region were "ignorant and licentious," but William, a puny boy, began to read the Bible at the age of twelve, and to attend the sermons of a noted non-conformist, the Rev. Richard Clyfton, at Babworth. Braving the wrath of his uncles, William joined, while still a lad, the small group which met at the house of William Brewster [q.v.] in Scrooby, and which became a separatist church in 1606. The attitude of their neighbors, and of the authorities, determined the Scrooby congregation "to goe into the Low-Countries, where they heard was freedome of Religion for all men." In the spring of 1609 Bradford joined the company in a stormy passage from Hull to Amsterdam, of whose hardships he gives a vivid picture. In 1609 he removed with the congregation, then under the Rev. John Robinson, to Leyden. On coming of age in 1611, Bradford converted "a comfortable inheritance left him of his honest parents" into money, which was consumed in certain "designs, by the Providence of God frowned upon" (C. Mather, *Magnalia*). He became a citizen of Leyden, is described in contemporary documents as a fustian weaver (1613) and say worker (1620), and owned a house on the Achtergracht, which he sold on a mortgage in 1619. At this period of his life Bradford must have acquired that wide knowledge of theological and general literature to which his

writings bear witness. The influence of the liberal and catholic spirit of his pastor, John Robinson, and of Elder Brewster, lasted throughout his life. Bradford defines his theological position (Calvinist in theology, Congregational in polity) in his Dialogues, but like Robinson he disowned sectarian labels, and wished to retain fellowship with all reformed churches. For, as he wrote, "it is too great arrogancie for any man or church to thinke that he or they have so sounded the word of God to the bottome." His liberalism much impressed the Jesuit, Father Druillette, who was entertained by him with a fish dinner at Plymouth, one Friday in 1650. Of Bradford's personal appearance or peculiarities not the slightest hint has come down to us, except that in the inventory of his estate, beside various "sad-colored" clothes, we find a red waistcoat, silver buttons, a colored hat, a violet cloak, and a Turkey gogram suit.

Bradford took a responsible part in the preparations for removal to the new world. He was probably one of those chosen to dispose "the commone stock . . . for the making of general provision." He signed a letter to Carver and Cushman, the agents at London, ordering them not to deviate from the original terms, in dealing with the merchant adventurers; this attitude he stoutly maintained amid the embarrassments of the final embarkation at Southampton.

From the sailing of the *Speedwell* from Delfshaven (c. Aug. 1, 1620), Bradford's life is inseparable from the history of the Pilgrim colony. He signed the Mayflower Compact on Nov. 11/21. Later in the same day the *Mayflower* anchored in Cape Cod (Provincetown) harbor. Bradford was "adjoined for council and advice" to the first exploring expedition which started out on Nov. 15/25, under Miles Standish. He was of the company of twenty who left Cape Cod harbor in the shallop, had the first encounter with the Indians, scudded into Plymouth harbor before a snow storm, rested the Sabbath on Clark's Island, landed at Plymouth (traditionally on the rock) on Dec. 11/21, and decided to settle there. He was taken ill during the first winter, but recovered; and in April 1621, on the death of John Carver, William Bradford was elected governor of the colony.

The situation of the Pilgrims when they arrived at Cape Cod, so eloquently described by Bradford in his ninth chapter, was much worse when the young governor took office. The great sickness had taken thirteen out of the twenty-four heads of families, all but four of their wives, and all but six of the unattached bachelors. The *Mayflower* had returned to England, provisions were running low, and there would be no harvest for four months. There were only twenty-one men and six big boys to do the planting; and they had no cattle until 1624. They knew nothing about deep-sea fishing and fur-trading, and had no means to do either. In like circumstances, many other colonies had perished. In Bradford's opinion, only the guiding hand of God kept Plymouth Colony alive. The presence of Samoset and Squanto [qq.v.], the windfalls of corn from unexpected quarters, the mysterious voice that warned them of the storehouse fire, the messenger losing his way and thereby delivering his warning, the "sweet and gentle showers" that came out of a clear sky just in time to save the crop, the turning back of the ship which was sent out to

foreclose the colony for the creditors; of such interventions Bradford is so certain of the source that he simply remarks, "Behold now another providence of God." Yet other events, no less necessary than these to save the colony, were due primarily to the inspired leadership of the Governor, and of men like Brewster, Winslow, and Standish, on whom he leaned. By sheltering both Hobbomock and Squanto, and playing them off against one another, Bradford obtained the best intelligence as to movements of the Indian tribes; and his Indian policy, a nice balance of kindness and firmness, obtained their friendship and secured his people.

Bradford urged rotation in office in 1624, but the freemen would not let him off; and he was reelected governor of the colony thirty times: every year from 1622 to 1656 with the exception of 1633, 1634, 1636, 1638, and 1644; when he "by importunity gat off" (Winthrop, *Journal*, Jan. 1, 1633); and on those occasions he was elected an assistant. Until 1639, when he was voted £20, he received no salary; and until 1651 had the privilege of dining the court of assistants at his own expense during their monthly sessions. In 1645 he was granted "a guard of two halbertes" to attend him at the General Court. The Pilgrims had slight opportunity to show political genius in their little colony; but their experience in church affairs had given them training for self-government, and they had the English instinct for majority rule. Their institutions were simple, and adapted to immediate needs rather than precedent, principles, or the terms of a charter. Bradford owned Jean Bodin's *Republic*, whose gibes at the communistic "conceits" of Plato he repeats in describing the failure of the "common course" at Plymouth; but that is the only instance in all his writings of interest in political science. He regarded the colony as an overseas Congregational church, and conducted it as such, whenever possible. Writing to the London merchants in 1623, he wished "our friends at Leyden . . . and we be considered as one body." "And indeed if they should not come to us, we would not stay here, if we might gain ever so much wealth" (*American Historical Review*, VIII, 300). Most of them were brought over by 1630, at great expense to the poor colony. Yet the franchise was never restricted to church members, as in Massachusetts Bay.

Bradford's difficulties during the early years of the colony were greatly augmented by "untowarde persons mixt amongst them from the first," people from various parts of England who were engaged as servants or attached to the colony by the merchants. Some of them, such as Miles Standish, John Alden, and Richard Warren, became "useful Instruments"; others failed to pull their weight, and several were lazy and seditious. Two of the merchants' protégés, Lyford the lewd parson, and Oldham the mad trader, started a dangerous faction. Weston, not content with cheating the Pilgrims in England, came to plague them at Plymouth. Thomas Morton established a disorderly house at their back door, and armed the Indians. Bradford dealt with such people as a genuine Christian and a consummate politician. After much forbearance the greedy and the factious would show themselves up, decamp or be expelled, come to grief, straggle back to Plymouth, beg forgiveness and fresh assistance, receive both, betray their benefactors again, and again come to grief. The Pilgrims always forgave the injury, and recovered from the wound. When, in 1627, Bradford and seven leading Pilgrims bought out the merchant

adventurers, and so acquired title to the land, houses, cattle, and implements at Plymouth, they decided, in order to preserve peace and union, to share and share alike with the "mixt multitude"; and distributed land and cattle by a method that "gave all good contente." This stroke of statesmanship placed the colony on a sound economic basis, and assimilated the outsiders to Pilgrim ideals. It created a quasi-corporation known as the "Old Comers" or "Purchasers," which became the governing class of the colony. In religious matters, although Bradford never professed toleration as a principle, his temper was distinctly liberal, for the period. Plymouth Colony passed no law against dissenters until 1650 and was little troubled by them; but Bradford lived to take part in the first legislation against Quakers (*Publications of the Colonial Society of Massachusetts*, XVII, 383).

During his first fifteen years of office, Bradford exercised a more plenary authority than any other English colonial governor between 1619 and 1685. The freemen (signers of the compact and those admitted subsequently to their number) met as a general court, elected the governor and assistants, and passed, sparingly at first, laws and regulations; but in practise they vested almost complete discretionary authority in their governor. Democracy has been read into the Pilgrim government by later historians; it cannot be found in the records, or in Bradford's *History*. In 1623 he declared that the generality were allowed to share in the government "only in some weighty maters, when we thinke good." Twenty years later, there were only 232 freemen in the jurisdiction, out of 634 men bearing arms (*Plymouth Colony Records*, VIII, 173-177; 187-196). The Governor was principal judge, and treasurer until 1637. The right of strangers to sojourn depended largely on his personal consent. As responsible for the business management, first to the merchants and then to the "Old Comers," he superintended agriculture and trade, apportioned the proceeds, and made the annual allotments of land. No distinction was made between executive, legislative, and judicial authority. Whether the Governor should do as he thought best in a given instance, or take the advice of his assistants or other leading freemen, or submit it for discussion or decision to church meeting or general court, depended on his own tact, and on circumstances. "Surely his energy must have been vast, his discretion remarkable, his ability commanding, or those stern and uncompromising men and women would scarcely have permitted him to regulate their affairs so long" (Usher, *The Pilgrims*, 1918, p. 205).

If Bradford had had any love of power or of gain, his opportunity came in 1630, when the "Warwick patent" from the Council for New England made him, and whomsoever he chose to associate with him, proprietors both of jurisdiction and soil. Bradford at once shared his right to the soil with the "Old Comers," and allowed the government to go on as before. In 1636, he was one of a committee which drafted a body of laws, defining the duties of Governor, Assistant, and General Court, requiring trial by jury in all but petty cases, and defining seven capital offenses. These laws of 1636 placed the governorship on a quasi-constitutional basis; yet even after that his position was much more independent than that of Winthrop or Haynes. In 1639 the grand jury of Plymouth evinced some jealousy as to the Old Comers' power to allot land, the Undertakers' monopoly of trade (see below), and the want of a colony

treasurer. After considerable debate in the General Court it was decided by mutual consent that Bradford and his associates surrender the Warwick patent to the freemen of the colony, reserving certain tracts of land for themselves. Apart from the Lyford faction, this is the only evidence of discontent with Bradford's rule that can be discovered.

In his business management, Bradford had the common sense to see that the colony would never prosper until its members were given a stake in its prosperity. He recognized that the merchant adventurers had a right to a return on their investment, and strove as best he could to repay them; but, in warm contact as he was with the struggle for existence, he could not all together avoid the typical pioneer attitude toward financial backers. "At great charges in this adventure, I confess you have beene, and many losses may sustain," he writes the merchants; "but the loss of his (Carver's) and many other honest and industrious mens' lives, cannot be valleded at any prise." In 1627 the colony's debt of £1,800 to the original merchant adventurers was assumed by Bradford, with seven Pilgrims and four London merchants. These twelve "Undertakers," in return for that burden, were assigned by the Old Comers a monopoly of fishing and trading. Under Bradford's direction the Undertakers pushed these enterprises with great vigor, but indifferent success. Isaac Allerton, their agent in London, and the London partners, corruptly converted most of the profits to their own uses; so that in 1631, after sending over hundreds of pounds' worth of beaver, the Undertakers were £5,771 in debt; and after another ten years' labor, when the Undertakers resigned their monopoly, the Plymouth group still owed £1,200 to the London men. "Thus they were abused in their simplicitie, and . . . sould," writes Bradford. The colony helped them out; but in 1648 Winslow and Prence had to sell their homes; Alden and Standish, 300 acres of land; and Bradford, a farm he owned at Rehoboth, in order to discharge the balance of £400. Bradford must have continued trading on his own account, since the principal items in the inventory of his estate (1657) are debts worth £153 upon the "Dutch account att the Westward" (the Manomet trading post), and goods and debts to the value of £256 in the trading stock at the Kennebec. His house, orchard, and sundry parcels of land at Plymouth were valued at £45. The rest of the inventory shows that he was far from being the wealthiest man in a colony of slender estates; but had accumulated property comparable to that of the better sort of English yeomen. He left a great silver "beer bowle," two silver wine cups and thirteen spoons, four Venice glasses, sundry pewter pots and flagons, and forty-nine pewter dishes, weighing ninety-seven pounds. His library was the largest at Plymouth except Elder Brewster's. Besides theology it included "divers Duch books," and works by Peter Martyr, Guicciardini, La Primaudaye, John Speed, and Jean Bodin.

Toward new colonies such as Massachusetts Bay, Bradford held out the hand of fellowship; and the harsh insolence which the Plymouth Colony sometimes received from the Bay authorities was disarmed by his mild answers, and firm insistence on the rights of Plymouth. He brought the colony into all common enterprises, such as the Pequot war and the New England Confederation; and attended the synod of 1647 at Cambridge, as messenger of the Plymouth Church. He welcomed the great Puritan migration to New England; although,

believing as he did in maintaining his colony as a compact community, he regretted the dispersal of population occasioned by the increase of cattle-raising (Bradford, *History*, 1912, II, 151). Probably his influence prevented the recognition as a township of Duxbury, the first offshoot of Plymouth, until 1637. He endeavored, without much success, to induce his people to give proper support to the ministry, and to establish free schools. When the Plymouth church called a distinguished non-conformist, the Rev. Charles Chauncy, to its teaching eldership, Bradford encouraged his abortive project of founding a Plymouth rival to Harvard College. The study of Hebrew, "that most ancient language, and holy tongue, in which the Law and Oracles of God were write; and in which God, and angels, spake to the holy patriarks, of old time," consoled the Governor in his old age, and thinking and writing about the heroic first decade afforded him great satisfaction. He died on May 9/19, 1657, believing that the glory was departed from Plymouth Colony.

Bradford married at Amsterdam, Dec. 10, 1613, Dorothy May, daughter of a member of the English Church there (*Mayflower Descendant*, IX, 115-17). She was drowned in Cape Cod harbor, Dec. 7/17, 1620. Their only son, John, afterward came to Plymouth, married, and died without issue. Alice (Carpenter), widow of Edward Southworth, a former member of the Leyden church, arrived at Plymouth in the *Anne* with her two small boys, in July 1623; Bradford married her on August 14. By this marriage, he had a daughter and two sons, William (1624-1704) and Joseph (1630-1715) whose descendants are now numbered by the thousand.

Bradford began to write his *History of Plimmoth Plantation* (sometimes idiotically called the "Log of the *Mayflower*"), about 1630, and probably completed Book I, down to the landing at Plymouth, within a year or two. Book II, which carries the story through 1646, was written between that year and 1650; the list of *Mayflower* passengers at the end, in 1651. He drew chiefly upon his own memory, but used a letter-book of correspondence, and his own rough notes and journal of the first year of settlement. Bradford was not writing for publication, and included matters which even in his day could not have been printed. He probably intended the book to be handed down in his family, as a perpetual monument to a high enterprise. His English is that of an educated, though not a learned man, deeply versed in the Geneva (not the King James) version of the Bible. It is not without conscious art, for he freely employs alliteration, and other conscious devices of contemporary English literature (E. F. Bradford, in *New England Quarterly*, I, 133-56). Touches of humor and irony enliven a plain story. Certain passages are worthy of Clarendon or Milton. But the peculiar quality of the work is imparted by the beauty, simplicity, and sincerity of the author's character. Although the *History* was not printed in full until 1856, the manuscript was used by colonial historians such as Morton, Hubbard, Prince, and Hutchinson, and Book I was printed in 1841, from a manuscript copy in the Plymouth church records. Directly and indirectly, it has been responsible for giving the Pilgrims and their colony the prominent place they occupy in American history, and popular tradition. There is no authority in Bradford for the sentimental and excessive claims that have been made for the Pilgrims; but there is ample ground for his own faith in their high mission.

## FURTHER READINGS

[Bradford's *Hist. of Plimmoth Plantation* is the principal source for his life. The cheapest complete edition is the one issued by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts in 1897 and still (1927) in print (Secretary of State's office, State House, Boston). The best is the one published by the Mass. Hist. Soc. (2 vols., 1912), with valuable notes by Worthington C. Ford. The interesting history of the MS. which now reposes in the State Lib. at Boston is told in every edition. A complete facsimile of it, edited by J. H. Doyle, was published in London, 1896. A surviving fragment of Bradford's letter-book, covering the years 1624-30, is printed in *Colls. Mass. Hist. Soc.*, ser. 1, vol. III, pp. 27-84, and as a pamphlet by the Mass. Soc. of Mayflower Descendants (1906). "Mourt's Relation" (*A Relation . . . of the English Plantation Settled at Plymouth*, London, 1622), including parts of Bradford's journal; and Winslow's *Good News from New England* (1624) are reprinted with other source material in E. Arber, *The Story of the Pilgrim Fathers* (1897), and A. Young, *Chronicles of the Pilgrim Fathers* (1841); *Good News* is also in *Mayflower Descendant*, XXV-XXVI; Bradford's letters to Governor Winthrop are printed in *Colls. Mass. Hist. Soc.*, ser. 4, vol. VI, pp. 156-61; an important letter of 1623 in *Am. Hist. Rev.*, VIII, 294-301. His first "Dialogue between some young men born in New England and sundry ancient men that came out of Holland" is printed in the Plymouth Church Records (*Pubs. Colonial Soc., Mass.*, XXII, 115-41), in Young's *Chronicles*, and in *Old South Leaflets*, II, no. 49. The second Dialogue has disappeared; the third Dialogue, together with Bradford's long descriptive poem of 1654 and "A Word to New Plymouth," is in *Proc. Mass. Hist. Soc.*, XI, 396-482. "A Word to New England" and "Of Boston in New-England" are in the *Colls. Mass. Hist. Soc.*, ser. 3, vol. VII, pp. 27-8. His will and inventory are in *Mayfl. Desc.*, II, 228-34; his marriage records *ibid.*, IX, 115-17. The *Plymouth Colony Records* (12 vols., Boston, 1855-61) are an important source. There is no good biography of Bradford. A fresh and enlightening study of the Plymouth Colony is that of R. G. Usher, *The Pilgrims and Their History* (1918); the principal older works are listed in Channing, Hart, and Turner's Guide, II128-31.]

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