

**The Sensibility and Conscious  
Style of William Bradford in  
*Of Plymouth Plantation*  
by  
John J. Fritscher, Ph.D.  
(Jack Fritscher, Ph.D.)**

**Published in *Bucknell Review* 17, 1969,  
pages 80-90**

**[Author's Note: The political application of this article, written in 1968 at the tumultuous height of the revolutionary 1960s, remains in 2004 apropos the psychology behind the Calvinist theocracy leading the fundamentalist culture war being waged in America during the George W. Bush administration.]**

Although arid passages occur in William Bradford's *History of Plymouth Plantation*, none ever approximates the veritable desert of critical interest paid to Bradford's *History* as a work of literature. Except for E. F. Bradford's suggestive 1928 article, criticism of *Plymouth Plantation* has never generated to more than factual nod to its factual existence in the first pages of innumerable surveys of American literature.<sup>1</sup> For too long has literary criticism abandoned to historians and cultural anthropologists a work whose content and style provide seminal chronicle to the initial thrust of the American literary experience.

Though the Pilgrims lost identity when absorbed in 1691 by the Massachusetts Bay Puritans, their congregational theocracy had already influenced the genesis of American democracy. The Bay Puritans had arrived, political charter in hand, but they looked to the Pilgrims for their model of congregational church government. It is part of history's irony that today the Pilgrim Fathers symbolize the solid, conservative American Establishment; for in their own context they were left-wing individualists discarding all ecclesiastical authority not scripturally sanctioned. Their resultant form of religious association, the congregation of priestly believers, not only influenced practically the church format of the Bay Colony but had beforehand ideally identified its own democratic essence in the social Compact of the *Mayflower*.

Bradford was ever as much shaper and exegete as historian of this essence. Although he writes history as a man of statement, he obviously condones as "creative" the modifications in Calvinism demanded by the exigencies of the Pilgrim experience. If Calvinism admitted of an elect, albeit an indeterminable group, then the Pilgrims—whose very Separatism gave them distinct identity—could creatively explain their alienation by an exclusive doctrine of congregationalism. Congregationalism, therefore, proffered obvious identification of the elect.

Bradford recognized many of the tensions inherent between an unadjustable theology and a wilderness where adjustment was survival. The import to American thought remains; for even three hundred years have taken the resolution of the tension little beyond Bradford's initial probing. Having accepted congregationalism after rejecting traditional ecclesiastical institutions, he tensed at the Calvinistic isolation of the individual worshiper whom his own Pilgrims had dared to call congregational worship. He saw tension between theocracy and democracy, between Calvin's individual and the Separatist's congregational social responsibility. His intellectual descendants still explore this same problem, examining the compatibility and place of the individual within the Great Society. [“The Great Society” was President Lyndon Johnson's 1960s phrase for social justice in the USA. –JF 2004]

The point is that Bradford soothes the tension between his five-point Calvinistic heritage and the democratizing wilderness experience by laying all under the smooth duress of

---

<sup>1</sup> "Conscious Art in Bradford's *History of Plymouth Plantation*," *New England Quarterly*, I (April 1928), 133-157.

Providence. [Calvinism promotes the five-point acronym TULIP: 1) total depravity of original sin; 2) unconditional election of those personally selected by God; 3) limited atonement dished out to particular people; 4) irresistible grace to those who cannot help but be saved; 5) perseverance of the saints.—JF 2004] For Providence is the moral characteristic of Bradford's literal historiography. While he intended to record the adventure in the New World according to the best principles of historiography, he likewise intended to interpret the adventure in terms of God's intentions: "It pleased the Lord to visit them this year with an infectious fever" (p. 197) and "It pleased God when he [their intended minister, Mr. Glover] was prepared for the voyage, he fell sick of a fever and died" (p. 217).<sup>2</sup> Bradford continually read this Providence *in melius*, but he must have suspected the basic tension between a static Calvinistic God demanding passivity and a colonial wilderness demanding every resource. His inheritors, the Bay Puritans, were first to witness the initial disintegration of formal New England Calvinism: the tension between theological system and early American reality proved practically intolerable.

But before the latter-day difficulties became obvious, Bradford had chronicled others. In his First Book, which detailed the reasons and causes of the Pilgrim removal, he cited their difficulties in Holland, their increasing age and diminishing numbers.[Bradford was thirty when he arrived in America on the *Mayflower*. JF 2004] Their children, he said, were losing language and nationality because of the Dutch exile. In addition, they felt a need for missionary work. Complementarily, Bradford—to underscore his apologetic First Book and to show how they expected Providence to prove their adventure—quoted a letter of John Robinson and William Brewster: "We verily believe and trust the Lord is with us, unto whom and whose service we have given ourselves in many trials; and that He will graciously prosper our endeavours according to the simplicity of our hearts therein" (p. 21). Bradford, therefore, set out in matter and style to explicate this wide Providence.

The matter of Bradford's annals was the founding of a Separatist culture in the New Promised Land. To a driven sect whose fundament was a literal bible base, the analogy came easily that they were the exiled people wandering to a New Canaan.

Had they not also in establishing their church entered into a "covenat of the Lord"? Were not Israel's experiences strikingly similar to their own?...Had not England been their Egypt? James I their Pharaoh? The Atlantic their Red Sea?<sup>3</sup>

And just as the Chosen People identified the Promised Land as the New Eden, so did the Pilgrim Separatists identify their new-found land. Not only the peculiar circumstances of the Pilgrim Separatists but the whole Calvinistic theology of culture effected this analogy.

Culture is just another name for the duty of mankind to develop the raw materials of this world as found in nature and in man himself, to demonstrate the great possibilities inherent in creation, which the Creator has put there, and make them serve the purposes which God has intended they should...It is [in fact] Christianity which gives to sinful man the regenerative power of the spirit [which enables him to seek out and ennoble a new order. The task of regenerating the world is very much] the task assigned to Adam when God caused the animals to pass by him. It was Adam's business to discover the nature of each animal, the essential idea of it,

---

<sup>2</sup> The page notations refer to the pagination in Bradford's manuscript, although the textual quotations are from *Of Plymouth Plantation 1620-1647* by William Bradford, ed. Samuel Eliot Morison (New York, 1952). Morison's great contribution is that he presents the *History* as a living document in a modern (not modernized) text.

<sup>3</sup> Joseph Gaer and Ben Siegel, *The Puritan Heritage: America's Roots the Bible* (New York, 1964), p. 3.

and then name it accordingly.<sup>4</sup>

Working within this regenerative theology, Bradford, even as literal historiographer, could hardly have neglected the obvious moral and esthetic dimension proffered him.

The Pilgrims envisioned themselves as the doers of this re-generation. As Bradford states, before they got too old they wanted to preserve their children and catechize, regenerate, the savage wilderness. They would take the new land and name all that was in it; for even as they felt themselves to be the elect in their congregationalism, so also they lived the Brownist psychology of the elect life. [The Separatists were often called “Brownists” after Robert Browne whom they considered their founder. The term “Brownist” was also used derisively against them. –JF 2004] They thought in Adamic terms and saw in America the New Eden where they were to be name-givers under God's directing Providence. This strong sense of an Edenic providential economy permeates the whole of Bradford's text. The five points of traditional Calvinism consequently mutate to a different emphasis: Bradford believes in the absolute sovereignty of a providential God directly intervening in the world to raise the elect from their natural depravity into the best possible New Eden.

Such a position is not pure Calvinism, but then Bradford—despite his agrarian Yorkshire background—was not a man of one book. It is a fact of history that Bradford was influenced linguistically both by the Bible and by Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*. As correlative bibliographical fact, the text of *Plymouth Plantation* refers to at least twenty other books familiar to Bradford.<sup>5</sup> With such a literary background and knowing the standards of historiography, Bradford proceeded to compose his *History* with a hand that conceals art. His second sentence is, in fact, a Puritan avowal that he “shall endeavour to manifest in a plain style, with singular regard into the simple truth in all things.” Nevertheless, he proceeded to put design upon the matter of his account. In addition to the obvious Hebraic allegory, his material allowed him to duplicate “in frontier reality the great struggles waged in the infinite world of spirit between Satan and the captive soul of man.”<sup>6</sup> He was not beyond developing characterization, using moral vignettes, and employing a frequently epistolary technique. The “plain style” allowed him to write his history-with-theological purpose in an idiom comprehensible to his largely bookless society without excluding many bellestristic trappings as essential as well as ornamental.

Bradford's matter, therefore, is as much to explicate the work of Providence as to give an accurate historical narrative. From his pen fall easily such phrases as “through the help of God” (p. 17), “rest...on God's providence” (p. 19), and “He [God] will graciously prosper our endeavours” (p. 21). In fact, in the ten chapters of Book One, Bradford makes forty-six references to Providence in fifty-three pages of his text. While he often finds God's active agency somewhat marvelous—for instance, the voice at the fire (p. 106), he nevertheless emphasizes the more ordinary Providence; he shows how necessary God's help was to a group of religious men inept at legal business and shipping transactions. [Actually, to the 21<sup>st</sup>-century ear, he sounds a bit disingenuous if not ironic considering the Pilgrims' relative success against all odds.] In Chapter XXXIII, he indicates that the greatest sign of God's Providence is the very longevity of the Pilgrim Fathers, nothing notwithstanding.

In addition he arranges much of his material to dramatize the Calvinistic belief in direct intervention by injecting brief moral vignettes of a rise and fall pattern. Weston, stripped to his shirt by the Indians, became a providential example of the vanity of material things; in the notorious Lyford-Oldham matter, it was “God in His providence [who]...brought these things [the letters] to their hands” (p. 126); as to the cheating John Peirce, “the Lord marvelously

---

<sup>4</sup> H. Henry Meeter, *Basic Ideas of Calvinism* (Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1956), p. 91.

<sup>5</sup> E. F. Bradford, *op. cit.*, p. 156.

<sup>6</sup> Russel B. Nye and Norman S. Grabo, *American Thought and Writing: The Colonial Period* (Boston, 1965), p. xxi.

crossed him" (p. 98); Merrymount's fun-loving Thomas Morton [whose Maypole the Puritans chopped down because of the dancing on the witch-feast of Beltane, May 1 –JF 2004. Confer *Popular Witchcraft.*] likewise fell gracelessly from his presiding over his New English Canaan to provide an example of the downfall of the worst, as does Hocking, the murderer on the Kennebec (p. 199).

Yet for Bradford the best Providence was ever the newfound land itself, *das neugefundenes Eden* of the popular religion-and-real-estate tracts of the times. For him the biblical trope of the Promised Land was the newfound physical and moral reality.

If Bradford's matter parallels generally the five-point basis of Calvinism, it correlates specifically with only two points; Providence, as mentioned, and the doctrine of election, which in reciprocity implies the general depravity of men and the irresistible rescue of the saved. However, once again on a practical level the tension between Calvinism and reality appeared: the communism of the elect did not work. They had at first thought to allay the tension by breaking with their adventurer-financiers; this failing, they had to end the "Common Course and Condition," giving every family a parcel of land, for young men did not like supporting other men's and men's wives did not like washing the single men's clothes. As early as 1623 free enterprise was born.

Always quick to point the moral of such an historical incident, Bradford the Patriarch nevertheless avoids overt apologetics; he avoids the traditional hellfire and bigotry of the Bay Puritans, who amid their theological disputes were finding that the new Eden like the old had its special curse. Neither posturing nor lying, so far is he from Pocahontas' lover [Captain John Smith], Bradford's genteel personality and humane sensibility nevertheless pervade a text he labored to keep impersonal. Of the families separated by the treacherous Dutchman, Bradford can interject concerning the abandoned women and children: "They (poor souls) endured misery enough" (p. 10). Of these same betrayed families he says, "If modesty would suffer me, I might declare with what fervent prayers they cried unto the Lord" (p. 9). In his supreme taste for selection of the proper detail, he is embarrassed by even the genuine excesses of his fellows in the congregation. His conciliatory temperament, which evidently served him well as governor, allowed him to explain quarrels internal to the congregation as differences and offenses that cannot but be "even amongst the best of men" (p. 13). After the literal end of the historiography, he aimed only to place a serious moral interpretation upon the matter of his annals. Thus on content alone, *Plymouth Plantation*

comes near being the literary classic of the American seventeenth century. The situation of civilized people struggling with a savage environment has proved perennially attractive in literature; consequently,...Bradford's history abounds in material of rich human interest. And the story is admirably told,—told with a biblical simplicity that rises at times to restrained and solemn eloquence.<sup>7</sup>

And it is, finally, just this eloquence, this style, that demands more than being described as merely and wondrously biblical. The chief literary influences on Bradford's style, the Bible and *The Pilgrim's Progress*, have been traditionally accepted. Yet beyond these lie two peculiar sensibilities: the one, a general matter of Calvinistic esthetics; the other, Bradford's own specific mode of expression. Calvin on art has long proved somewhat embarrassing to modern Calvinists, for historically

Calvinism...contributed to aesthetic barrenness in making art seem impotent if not irrelevant: God's beauty was all sufficing, and works of nature and of art could be only weak reflections thereof. In addition, the intense conviction of earthly transience further discouraged painstaking artistic creation and concern with form.

---

<sup>7</sup> W. F. Taylor, *A History of American Letters* (New York 1936), p. 7.

Emphasis was on ideas and themes rather than on beauty of expression.<sup>8</sup>

John Cotton in his Preface to the *Bay Psalm Book* summed up the Puritan esthetic: “God's altar needs not our polishing.” Bradford's mode of expression may not here be so generally dismissed.

Just as his colonists used the natural American materials to build their culture, Bradford was an artist ingenious enough to mine his Calvinistic background for its native materials. Calvin had heavily laced his *Institutes* with biblical quotations and allusions; Bradford was as highly aware of Calvin's spare and plain style as he was of the high style he knew from his reading.<sup>9</sup> Infusing elements of the high into the spare, he created a style both historiographically serviceable and his own.

Book II of the History begins the annalistic journal in 1620 and carries it to 1647. In Book I Bradford constructed as a *post factum* summary a brief and knowledgeable Separatist interpretation aimed essentially at displaying the reasons and causes of their removal. It is here that Bradford makes functional as a literary device what had until that time been merely reassuring theological analogy: the equation of the Pilgrim Separatists with the exiled Hebrews. In Book I,iv, perhaps the most powerful of all Bradford's *History*, he writes of their exile in Holland. He mentions the “hardness of the place and contry,” the “great labour and hard fare,” and the “bondage” which they endured. He employs biblical tropes—easily memorable in their essentially bookless society: for example, as a trope of departure he compares their leaving their loved ones in England and Holland, saying, “Yet they left them as it were weeping, as Orpah did her mother-in-law Naomi” (Ruth 1.14). He quotes frequently from Proverbs in a way that was to become characteristic of New England pithiness and the colonial American craze for almanacs.

He makes many classical references important to his well-educated peers more than to his less classically educated American descendants. A quick perusal suggests over twenty citations of books other than the Bible with frequent references to Cato (p. 15), Seneca (p. 115), and Pliny (p. 116). More important stylistically is his use of the objection-answer format of the classically scholastic *disputationes*: here, in 1624, he answers all the objections made against New Plymouth by those who had returned to England. For example:

6th obj.: The water is not wholesome. Ans.: If they mean, not so wholesome as the good beer and wine in London (which they so dearly love), we will not dispute with them; but else for water it is as good as any in the world (for aught we know) and it is wholesome enough to us that can be content therewith. (p. 112)

In addition Bradford is often quite patrological in literary temperament. He opens his *History*, in fact, with a duel between Satan and the Saints over what will be the nature of the Church (its primitive, innocent purity *versus* sophisticated modern heresies) in a debate typical of the second- and third-century Fathers of the Church.<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> Nye and Grabo, *op. cit.*, p. xxxii.

<sup>9</sup> See John T. McNeill, ed., Calvin: *Institutes of the Christian Religion* in *The Library of Christian Classics* (Philadelphia, 1960). Coincidental to the literary plight of Bradford's *History*, Calvin's *Institutes*—so vastly influential to many American men of letters—has received scant attention as a document seminal to literature and has been relegated mostly to discussions of theology.

<sup>10</sup> Bradford recalls the schisms of the early Church, particularly that of the Arians *versus* the “orthodox and true Christians” (p. 2). In the same place he quotes Socrates Scholasticus, a fifth-century Greek historian, known to him through the M. Hanmer translation, *His Ecclesiastical History* (London, 1577). Cf. Morison, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

Within his annalistic format, which he strives to keep objectively impersonal, he still exhibits all the talents of the true yarnspinner. Despite the pointing moral of all his *exempla*, his vignettes are more often anecdotes whose humor and pathos Bradford, as a sensitive man in an elemental experience, could not but recognize. Besides the water boiler who burns down the evaporating shed to make salt more quickly, Mad Jack Oldham and the uproarious Morton of Merrymount provide delicious slices of colonial life; the biblical trial of Thomas Granger, the teenage sodomite, is a lurid underside to the New Zion experience and a clue that all in the colonies was not so staid as tradition has believed. [Thomas Granger, approximately seventeen years old, and most likely homosexual, buggered "a mare, a cow, two goats, five sheep, two calves and a turkey." The small herd of livestock lovers was slaughtered before his eyes minutes before the Plymouth Pilgrims hanged him.—JF 2004. Confer *Popular Witchcraft*, University of Wisconsin Press.]

Upon these anecdotes Bradford bases whatever moral lesson seems to him appropriate. In fact, an isolation of his moral interjections gives evidence for his evolving editorial talent. S. E. Morison points, for instance, to the last sentence of I.v. "This last sentence," Morison writes, "was written later than the rest of the chapter; Bradford evidently decided, on reading it over, to point the moral."<sup>11</sup> At the close of I.vi, Bradford himself apologizes for his sprawling epistolary reportage concerning the Weston contract:

I have been the longer in these things, and so shall crave leave in some like passages following (though in other things I shall labor to be more contract) that their children may see with what difficulties their fathers wrestled in going through these things in their first beginnings....As also that some use may be made hereof in after times by others in such like weighty employments. (p. 36)

Bradford is his own best editor, precisely because he let the rules of an objective historiography gauge his episodically anecdotal material. He makes everything work to the end that what he records of the past can be built upon by the future.

For this reason, too, Bradford usually writes with an honest but brutally frank realism. The Pilgrims were not dolts wandering into a newfound geographical Eden; Bradford writes of their consideration while yet in Holland of "famine and nakedness and want" and "the change of air, diet and drinking water [which] would infect their bodies with sore sicknesses and grievous diseases." He adds for good measure the savages who "delight to torment men in the most bloody manner." He details being flailed alive and broiled on coals and having the colllops [pieces of flesh cut thin, pounded, and minced] of one's flesh eaten (p. 17).

With clinical detail he relates a smallpox epidemic among the Indians. His realistic reporting is worthy of a novelist's imposition of Aristotelian unity on the horrifying disparate moments of anyone's perceived reality.

[The Indians] that have this disease...for want of bedding and linen and other helps...fall into a lamentable condition as they lie on their hard mats, the pox breaking and mattering and running into another, their skin cleaving...to the mats they lie on. When they turn them, a whole side will flay off at once...and they will be all of a gore blood...And then...they die like rotten sheep. (pp. 203-204)

This clinical realism flows easily from the pen of a man steeped in the writings of Calvin; for Calvin viewed the world as an Eden become one vast hospital ward. In his *Institutes* Calvin talks much of rot, of men infected with the disease and contagion of sin,<sup>12</sup> of sin's deadly

---

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 35.

<sup>12</sup> McNeill, *op. cit.*, p. 249.

wounding of nature.<sup>13</sup> It is most convenient that the theological dogma of the one complements the perceived reality of the other.

In addition Bradford engages an authoritative technique of historiography: enumeration for credibility, an inventory of detail. Yet beyond what can be expected of the historian, Bradford as literary stylist sometimes follows, consciously or unconsciously, the Aristotelian advice, changing past tenses to the present to heighten immediacy and realism and verisimilitude. Having written in the past tense, Bradford, drawing everybody suddenly up around his hearth (the wind and snow howling outside), says, “Behold, now, another providence of God.” His hands make a wide gesture. “A ship comes into the harbor, one Captain Jones being chief therein.” And his little tale is well begun.

Inasmuch as E. F. Bradford in 1928 listed examples of particular structural patterns in the style of the *History*, a slightly amplificatory review might here be helpful. Besides the larger structural analogy of the biblical metaphor, small metaphors of color are used;<sup>14</sup> similes are frequent with an “unaffected and illuminating aptness”;<sup>15</sup> word choice is vivid and to the point; alliteration is frequent; the balances and antitheses in their frequency show—what E. F. Bradford did not point out—the obvious influence of Peter Ramus. [French humanist and Calvinist, 1515-1572, minimalist Peter Ramus reduced the Aristotelian five-part system of rhetoric (invention, style, memory, arrangement, and delivery) to basic plain-speaking style and delivery. His Calvinistic consideration that rhetoric was no more than “ornamentation” stifled what moderns think of as creativity and imagination in Western culture. French Catholics favoring more florid art and philosophy butchered him during the St. Bartholomew Day Massacre.]

Clearly, William Bradford was no Euphues [John Lyly's gay character “Euphues” who substitutes good terms for bad, calling, for instance, a mole on the face “a beauty spot”; euphemism. –JF 2004]; he wrote rather on a level of literary diction in which the style was not only decorously apropos of the matter but also sharply evocative of the original experience. The delicate balance of the “simple truth...in a plain style” insured both the historiographer's credible objectivity as well as the moralist's pervasively ethical thrust. It is for this reason—the authority of his style so serviceably infusing his matter—that Bradford's *Of Plymouth Plantation* is tendered such great credence; for in matters of internal evidence, nothing witnesses Bradford's conscious involvement in the facts and sensibility of the proto-American experience more than does his native style. © 1969 and 2004 Jack Fritscher

---

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 254.

<sup>14</sup>“They demolished his [Morton's] house that it might be no longer a roost for such unclean birds to nestle in.”

<sup>15</sup>E. F. Bradford, *op. cit.*, pp. 150 ff.