title: *Of Plimmoth Plantation* as a Literary Work

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[(essay date 1978) *In this essay, Westbrook surveys Bradford's use of varied prose styles and literary devices, including metaphor and irony.*]

Bradford's minor prose and his poetry would receive scant notice, at least as belles-lettres, had they not come from the pen of the man who wrote ***Of Plimmoth Plantation.*** Their value lies in what they reveal of their author's mind and in the light they may cast on the values and ideals of early New England. Any assessment of Bradford's literary talents must be made on the basis of his ***History.***

**I. Early Impact of Bradford's *History***

Strangely, ***Of Plimmoth Plantation***--by common consent the greatest history written in colonial America--did not appear in print until 1856. The story of the vicissitudes of the manuscript--what Samuel Eliot Morison calls the "History of a History"--has been told in detail elsewhere.1 In briefest summary, the manuscript remained in Bradford's family for three generations after his death; and it then found its way into Thomas Prince's New England Library, which was shelved in the steeple of the Old South Church. During the Revolution, it was apparently appropriated by one of the soldiers or officers of the British army that occupied Boston and eventually found its way to the Library of the Bishop of London, where it was "discovered" in 1855. A year later, the Massachusetts Historical Society published a scholarly edition of it; and in 1897, after much negotiation on the highest diplomatic levels, the manuscript was brought to Boston and deposited in the State Library.

Before its full publication in 1856, however, the manuscript had served as a major source for historians of New England, and its uses as such deserve attention. As has been observed earlier, Nathaniel Morton, who had long served as secretary of New Plymouth, published *New Englands Memoriall* (1669), in which he drew heavily from ***Of Plimmoth Plantation.*** Moses Coit Tyler, the first thorough historian of colonial American literature, has made note of certain closely parallel passages in the two authors' works,2 and even a casual reader could find many more.

A considerable difference, however, exists between Morton's and Bradford's presentations of the material, for Morton emphasizes much more strongly than Bradford the providential element, as he saw it, in the history of Plymouth. Perhaps this tendency pleased and edified his contemporaries, but it is a drawback for the modern reader for whom quite enough "providences" exist in Bradford's book. Yet this use of Bradford's material and of sizable blocks of his prose amounts to a sort of publication and contributes importantly to the impact of Bradford as an interpreter of early American history.

Morton's *Memoriall,* nevertheless, was criticized by some Plymouth church members for being "too sparing and short" in its treatment of the ecclesiastical affairs of the plantation; and, as a consequence, Morton obligingly compiled "something more particularly Relateing to the Church of Plymouth."3 This manuscript, loaned to Increase Mather, was burned in a great fire in Boston in 1676; but it was quickly replaced by another effort of Morton's, based in large part on material from ***Of Plimmoth Plantation.*** Morton carefully attributed this second narrative to his uncle and wrote it into the *Plymouth Church Records* in 1679-1680, where it constitutes "An introduction to the Eclesiasticall history [*sic*] of the Church of Christ att Plymouth in New England."4

Morton copied his uncle's first five chapters almost *in toto,* but with some verbal inaccuracies or variations. The ensuing four chapters he transcribed less completely, for much material in them did not relate to church history.5 He also drew from other sections of Bradford's manuscript, using, for example, the entire memoir of William Brewster. Excerpts from these transcriptions were published by Ebenezer Hazard in 1792 in volume I of his *Historical Collections,* though rather strangely the authorship is attributed to Morton, who had plainly noted in the *Records* that Bradford was the author.6

More extensive portions of Morton's "Eclesiasticall history," including all the matter extracted from Bradford's first nine chapters and the Brewster eulogy, appeared in 1841 in Alexander Young's *Chronicles of the Pilgrim Fathers.* Young, like other scholars of the time, was aware of the existence in the past of a voluminous Bradford manuscript--to the value of which indeed most of its users had referred--but he considered it to be hopelessly lost. Yet his publication of much of Morton's copy of it was the most extensive exposure of it in print up to that time.7

Morton was, of course, only one of the early users of the Bradford manuscript. Increase Mather, for example, examined Book II (the annals section) and gleaned from it material for his book about the Indian wars, *A Relation of the Troubles which have hapned in New-England* (1677),8 and somehow the Bradford manuscript escaped a fire which destroyed Mather's house and part of his library. Cotton Mather, Increase's son, later drew from ***Of Plimmoth Plantation*** for his treatment of Plymouth and of Bradford in *Magnalia Christi Americana.*9 Somewhat earlier William Hubbard saw the manuscript and found it useful in writing his *General History of New England from the Discovery to MDCLXXX,* which was completed in 1680 but not printed until 1815. In the eighteenth century Thomas Prince drew heavily from ***Of Plimmoth Plantation*** for his *Chronological History of New England in the form of Annals* (1736), quoting or paraphrasing many long passages; and in the same century, Thomas Hutchinson quoted Bradford at length in his *History of the Colony of Massachusetts Bay* (1764-67).

Apparently any person in colonial New England who aspired to write a history of the region resorted to Bradford's manuscript. The wonder is that it was not published before its disappearance from Boston. Yet, wraithlike, it always lurked in the New England background--an unforgettable presence to those who read or wrote history.

**II. *Of Plimmoth Plantation* as Conscious Literary Art**

Ever since the discovery in 1855 of the long-lost manuscript of Bradford's ***History*** in the Bishop of London's library, its prose style has given rise to much and varied comment, and most of it has been admiring. An early commentator was an Englishman, John A. Doyle, a fellow of All Souls College, Oxford, and editor of the Facsimile Edition of the manuscript published in 1896; and Doyle's remarks on Bradford's style in the Introduction to this edition are brief but discerning. Quite appropriately he enters into a general comparison of Bradford with John Winthrop, the governor of Massachusetts Bay and the author of an extensive journal recording events in the history of that colony. In learning, experience, and sophistication, Doyle finds that the Cambridge-educated Winthrop cut a more impressive figure than did the yeoman Bradford. But Doyle does not concede to Winthrop a superiority as a judge of human nature or as a literary artist; for Winthrop, Doyle opines, lacks Bradford's "picturesque felicity in sketching an incident or a character."10 In support of his opinion, Doyle cites Bradford's accounts of Lyford's arrival in Plymouth, Oldham's departure as he runs the gauntlet, the visit of the Dutch to Plymouth, and the first reception of Massasoit and his retinue.

Doyle further points out that Bradford, unlike Winthrop, had "a strong sense of literary responsibility which animates and controls" his writing, and that he "set forth at the outset with the clear, defined purpose of telling a story,"11 whereas Winthrop seemed to have in mind no other purpose than that of writing a diary. Doyle, who believes that Bradford planned on the eventual printing of his manuscript, refers to an aside made by Bradford--"as will appear, if God give life to finish this history" (II, 110)--in support of this belief. Doyle finds evidence in the manuscript that Bradford had revised certain pages as he wrote.12

This same point--that Bradford was writing with a conscious literary intention--was elaborated upon by another Englishman, G. Cuthbert Blaxland, in *"Mayflower" Essays,* which was published also in 1896. Blaxland, as "domestic chaplain to the late Bishop of London,"13 had been custodian of the bishop's library in which the Bradford manuscript was deposited, and he had studied the manuscript with care and pleasure. Most of his observations are acceptable, partly because he concerned himself with details so obvious that many critics would not have deigned to mention them. For example, he remarks that, although the manuscript is autobiography as well as history, Bradford "hardly ever permits himself to appear in the story except under the impersonal designation of the 'Governor.'"14 Yet Blaxland has the perception to view this apparently superficial detail of authorial reticence as a stylistic device which is highly revelatory of Bradford's character.

Blaxland also points out that the meticulously neat physical appearance of the manuscript itself reveals the character of its author as well as his intentions in writing it. The exquisite handwriting is perfectly legible even to a modern eye, since each letter was separately and painstakingly formed, though variations exist in the size of the letters in different parts of the manuscript. But the care with which the whole was written indicated to Blaxland that it was actually a fair, or at least a semifinal, copy of an earlier version. Probably Bradford's reference in 1646 to "these scribled writings" that he began "aboute the year 1630, and so peeced up at times of leasure afterwards" (I, 14) was really to the notes from which the history was later written--or at least so Blaxland believes, and with considerable reason.

There is other evidence that supports this theory, especially as it applies to Book II. The first part of the manuscript begins with a presentation of the theological and political situation in which the Pilgrim congregation was formed and then traces the story of the group through its flight from England, its residence in Holland, its voyage to America, and its settlement in 1620/21 in Plymouth. This consecutive historical account deals with events ten to twenty years in the past; and its author consciously composed it as such in 1630, as he says, and perhaps revised it later. Beginning with the events of the final months of 1620 (Old Style), however, Bradford set down the story of Plymouth Plantation in the form of annals. But, since he had written nothing before 1630, the first ten annals at least must have been compiled from memory and from records in a more or less continuous literary effort.

Yet in the midst of the first annal, that for the year 1620/21, Bradford, in writing of the treaty with Massasoit, states that it had "continued this ·24· years" (I, 201). Thus this annal was either written or revised in 1644, and we may conclude that most, if not all, of the manuscript as it now exists was written or rewritten long after the events that it records. As Blaxland has put it, "We are justified, therefore, in regarding the history as the work of Bradford's later years, written in the maturity of his judgment, and in view of the issue to which the events were tending."15

**III. Prose Style: Biblical and Folk Elements**

Proceeding to a consideration of Bradford's prose style, Blaxland indicates how profoundly it has been influenced by the Bible, mainly the Geneva translation, though at times Bradford quotes from the Authorized Version. But the styles of the two translations are far from totally dissimilar, for each is characterized by concrete Anglo-Saxon diction and by a balanced rhythmical sentence structure. Indeed, only a very few pages in ***Of Plimmoth Plantation*** do not contain either paraphrases or quotations from the Scriptures, and these blend so well with the general style of the book that they often pass unnoticed, except, of course, when Bradford cites chapter and verse, as he frequently does. The result is a highly readable, unobtrusively sonorous and rhythmical prose that has often been compared to that of John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1678-1684) (which was written from much the same religious point of view as was ***Of Plimmoth Plantation***). It is interesting to note that Bradford's quotations from the Old Testament outnumber those from the New Testament by five to two, perhaps because he saw a closer resemblance between the story of the ancient Jews and that of the Pilgrims than he did to any narrative in the New Testament, but perhaps also because of the simple fact that the Old Testament is about three times longer than the New.

In keeping with the biblical flavor of Bradford's style was his penchant for the use of homely, sometimes earthy words and phrases doubtless drawn from his own experience as a Yorkshire country boy and as one whose duties and circumstances in later life brought him into close association with sailors, farmers, traders, soldiers. Such words and phrases are to be found throughout his writing, many of them in passages that have already been or will be quoted; but a glance back at the account of Oldham's doings provides examples. In describing the colony's difficulties with Oldham, who it will be recalled had been "a cheefe sticler in [a] former faction among the perticulers ..." (I, 381-82), Bradford writes that he refused to obey Myles Standish's order that he stand his turn at sentry duty but "drew his knife at" the captain, and "ramped more like a furious beast then a man" and did not quiet down until "after he was clapt up a while" (I, 384-85) in jail. Returning to Plymouth the next year in defiance of his sentence of banishment, he again fell into a "madd furie," and the authorities "commited him till he was tamer, and then apointed a gard of musketers which he was to pass throw, and ever one was ordered to give him a thump on the brich, with the but end of his musket, and then [he] was conveied to the water side, wher a boat was ready to cary him away. Then they bid him goe and mende his manners" (I, 411).

This language of the common people is used unconsciously perhaps but zestfully by a writer with an appreciative ear. Not only is the diction that of the people, but so are the sentence pace and rhythms, which are not unlike those heard in remote rural and coastal New England even to this day. Although Bradford is at his colloquial best in describing troublemakers like Oldham, he wrote equally racy accounts of the doings of Lyford, Thomas Morton, and Weston. But at no time--not even in his most serious moments--does he resort to pomposity or artificiality; therefore, passages like the one just quoted do not contrast gratingly with the general biblical flavor of his style--for the language of the English Bible was not alien to that of the people.

As might be expected in writing that draws heavily from the everyday speech of almost four centuries ago, ***Of Plimmoth Plantation*** contains many words with meanings now obsolete. In Bradford's account of the dealings with Oldham, "sticler" (stickler) and "ramp" no longer carry the meanings they did for him. On the other hand, "clapt" and "but" (butt), both colloquial in flavor, have not changed their meanings. An interested reader can find many instances of both sorts. A few examples of archaic expressions are *chatchpoule* (I, 31), a word of Provençal origin that meant literally one who hunts fowls but that later meant a tax-gatherer and, in Bradford's time, a sheriff's officer (see modern *catchpole,* one who makes arrests for debt); *eftsone,* a Chaucerian word, that meant *soon* or *soon afterwards* (I, 415); *sadd* (I, 401), that meant not *sad* but *earnest, serious,* as in Chaucer; *marchante,* that meant a fellow or chap (I, 384); *bear (bore) in hand,* another Chaucerian expression, that meant *to deceive* (I, 378); *uncouth,* also found in Chaucer, that meant *not known, unfamiliar* (I, 37); *to have a hankering mind after* something, meaning *to covet* (II, 216). The list could be greatly extended; and other examples may be found in Blaxland's *"Mayflower" Essays* (130-33), from which several of those cited have been taken.

Of additional interest are the seventeenth-century pronunciations reflected in Bradford's spelling, which was normally erratic for his times, but sufficiently phonetic to reveal much about the English he spoke. For example *ea,* for Bradford, was sounded in many words as it is in the modern *great;* that is, it was frequently the equivalent of *ay* or the *a* in *wave,* and it frequently replaced these spellings. Thus one finds *streats* for *straits; sprea* for *spray (sea spray); reane* for *rain, deanger* for *danger.* Conversely, one sees *plased* for *pleased, craked* for *creaked,* and *wained* for *weaned;* and *reather* for *rather* indicates an archaic pronunciation of the word. Other differences in pronunciation are indicated by *viage* for *voyage* (still found in dialect) and *farom* for *farm* (perhaps an echo of Bradford's Yorkshire upbringing).

**IV. "A Plaine Stile"**

A noteworthy aspect of Bradford's prose is that it consciously eschews the complex, allusive, rhetorical, "metaphysical" style--one akin to the high style of the Middle Ages--so greatly prized in the Renaissance. Bradford, indeed, announced in a prefatory statement to ***Of Plimmoth Plantation*** that he would "endevor to manefest in a plaine stile" the "occasion and Indusments" that gave rise to the settling of Plymouth Plantation, "with singuler regard unto the simple trueth in all things, at least as near as my slender Judgmente can attaine the same" (I, 1). The distinction between a high and a low style had existed since long before Chaucer's time. In Renaissance England, the high, or "metaphysical," style, which reached unprecedented degrees of ornateness, complex sentence structure, intricate rhythms, and extravagant figures of speech, was exemplified in its most effective form in the sermons of John Donne and Lancelot Andrewes. Since the ornate style was associated with the aristocracy and the established church, it is not surprising that the Puritans, for their sermons, favored a style which was unadorned, simple, and direct. A group that recommended stripping the Anglican services of their embellishments could not tolerate discourses in which the language and rhetoric vied with the message for the attention of listeners. Language to the Puritan was intended to instruct and to inform--not to amuse.16 The fact is, moreover, that the plain style, when employed by New England preachers like John Cotton, Thomas Hooker, and Urian Oakes, did prove effective, as it did in the *Journal* of Winthrop and in Bradford's ***History.***

Since the age of twelve, Bradford had been exposed to Puritan sermons, presumably in the plain style, if we may judge from the extant writings of John Robinson, who was a minister to the Pilgrims from the Scrooby days through their residence in Holland. Robinson's published theological tracts and essays, all of them doubtless familiar to Bradford, are eminent examples of the plain style. Everything in Bradford's life and thinking would lead to his adopting the plain rather than the high mode of expression. It is so obvious that such would be his choice that one wonders that he bothered to state the fact in his prefatory note to ***Of Plimmoth Plantation.***

The feelings of the Pilgrims about the two styles is cogently illustrated in an introduction that Deacon Robert Cushman, a member of the Separatist Church in Leyden, wrote for a sermon, or discourse, that he had delivered during a short visit to Plymouth in 1621. Cushman had crossed the Atlantic on a business errand for the London adventurers and, just before sailing on the return voyage, he addressed the settlers who were gathered in the Common House. His text was "Let no man seek his own; but every man another's wealth" (1 Cor. 10:24). His major purpose obviously was to answer some of the colonists who had complained about having to contribute the fruits of their labor to the common store. Deacon Cushman was exercising the privilege that Separatists not ordained to preach had of "prophesying," that is, of sermonizing; and he was also deliberately employing the plain style, as he carefully specified in his introduction to the printed version of the sermon. In the event, he wrote, that any of his readers should consider his manner of discoursing "too rude and unlearned for this curious age, let them know, that to paint out the Gospel in plain and flat English, amongst a company of plain Englishmen, (as we are,) is the best and most profitable teaching; and we will study plainness, not curiosity [subtlety], neither in things human nor heavenly."17

Despite such protestations, however, the plain style was not entirely free of the mannerisms of the high style. The Elizabethan age was one in which the English language was characterized by an efflorescence, an ebullience, a power, unequaled before or since. In this age of great English poetry and of great English prose, the devices of balance and antithesis and parallelism, the generous use of alliteration, simile, metaphor, and personification were traits of all prose, high or plain; but they were much more obtrusively and self-consciously present in the former than in the latter. Men and women of all ranks and opinion seemingly took a joy in their language and regarded it not only as a powerful tool but as a fascinating plaything, as is evidenced by the frequent indulgence in puns even among the devotees of the plain style. It was as if all speakers, or at least writers, of the English language had suddenly and simultaneously found themselves in possession of an amazing new instrument from which, like a conductor from his orchestra, they could call forth an infinity of variations of sound and sense that appealed now to one and now to another emotion, mood, or faculty of the mind. The magic of language--so similar to the magic of music--had been discovered and was being exploited to the limit.

Thus certain stylistic mannerisms and rhetorical devices were part of the discourse, oral or written, formal or informal, of the age. A most useful study of Bradford's prose style and of its relationship to the literary currents and fashions of his era is E. F. Bradford's "Conscious Art in Bradford's ***History of Plymouth Plantation***"18 that was contributed to the *New England Quarterly* in 1928. The author points out that Bradford makes frequent and deliberate use of the devices of balance, antithesis, and alliteration and that he couples words of virtually the same meaning--all of which practices are typical of high style. In addition, attention is called to Bradford's habit of building his sentences to a climax by piling one clause or phrase on another in parallel structure, though he sometimes drops tension at the end.

Bradford employed such devices with calculated moderation, but his use of plain style did not stem from the fact that he was a "plain man." In origin, to be sure, he was a man of the people; but his talents, including the will and the ability to teach himself, were far from typical of his yeoman class. The rhetorical elements in Bradford's prose were common in almost all the writing of his era; and they decorate, though less obviously, his own and others' business letters, including those printed in ***Of Plimmoth Plantation.*** Yet in his *History*--it must be emphasized--Bradford was striving deliberately for literary effect; and he at times heightened his style and at others muted it as suited his purposes. Indeed, it has been suggested that he was consciously imitating the euphuistic style of Lord Berners's *The Golden Book of the Emperor Marcus Aurelius* (1535).19

**V. Figures of Speech**

In a famous, emotion-charged passage that appears at the end of Chapter 9 of the *History* (I, 155-58), Bradford, meditating on the hardships of the ocean crossing and on the bleakness of Cape Cod in November, speaks of the "sea of troubles" that the voyagers had also traversed--a pun in its context and also a metaphor. A true Renaissance man, along with his Puritanism, Bradford had a liking for puns and used them elsewhere, as for example when he refers to Thomas Morton's "idle or Idoll May-polle" (II, 49) at Merry Mount, around which Morton's men and their Indian women companions danced and frisked "like so many fairies, or furies rather" (II, 48).

The latter pun is actually a double simile, and Bradford frequently ornaments his prose with similes as well as with metaphors. He alludes to Morton's house at Merry Mount as a "nest" (II, 74); and a few sentences later, when referring to Morton's return from England to the same house, he states that the Pilgrims demolished it "that it might be no longer a roost for shuch unclaine birds to nestle in" (II, 76). Though Morton seems to have inspired Bradford to unusual flights of rhetoric, ***Of Plimmoth Plantation*** is abundantly stocked with figures of speech freighted with profounder emotion than the scorn directed against the Merry Mounters.

Thus, in his description of the Pilgrims' destitution in Holland, Bradford employs personification coupled with simile: "Yet it was not longe before they saw the grimme and grisly face of povertie coming upon them like an armed man; with whom they must bukle, and incounter, and from whom they could not flye; but they were armed with faith, and patience against him, and all his encounters; and ... they prevailed, and got the victorie" (I, 37). This personification of poverty as a warrior with whom a desperate battle must be fought, with victory assured because the "saints" are armed with faith--a metaphor with biblical parallels--constitutes one of those elaborate figurative combinings known as conceits, which were so common in Renaissance literature. It is noteworthy that in this passage Bradford draws not only from his own imagination but also from the Bible--itself so rich in figurative language.

Another such oblique biblical allusion occurs when Bradford describes the misgivings of some of the Leyden congregation about migrating to North America without the king's seal on their patent. Calling to mind the parable of the two men who built their respective houses on rock and on earth (Luke 6:48, 49), Bradford writes that the overly cautious souls in the congregation feared that to go on with the American venture in the absence of full royal ratification "might prove dangerous, and but a sandie foundation" (I, 69). Such passages do much to make ***Of Plimmoth Plantation*** more than a mere record of events, for the effective use of them results in a stimulation of the reader's imagination to produce an effect analogous to that of poetry. Raw facts, events, and characters passed through the alembic of the creative imagination become literature or art.

But, as a historian, Bradford had to subject his materials not only to the transforming processes of the imagination but also to thoughtful analysis. His joining of these two functions has produced some impressive results. A frequently quoted example, involving the use of analogy, is in one of his speculations about the causes of the outbreak of immorality in Plymouth Colony in 1642. "It may be ... as it is with waters when their streames are stopped or dammed up, when they gett passage they flow with more violence, and make more noys and disturbance, then when they are suffered to rune quietly in their owne chanels. So wikednes being here more stopped by strict laws, and the same more nerly looked unto, so as it cannot rune in a comone road of liberty as it would, and is inclined, it searches every wher, and at last breaks out wher it getts vente" (II, 309).

Perceptive analysis, coupled with the exercise of the imagination as in this passage, conveys to the reader of this statement a vivid sense of just what was happening and of how serious the situation was. The visual and aural image of the rushing, turbulent water as it bursts through a barrier arouses in the reader an emotional reaction that is presumably akin to that felt by the responsible magistrates and church members of Plymouth as the pent-up urges of many of the inhabitants broke through social and religious restraints. The effect is similar, in fact, to that produced by the extended similes, or analogies, of Homer and Virgil.

The use of rhetorical devices of all sorts that was apparently second nature to Bradford when he wrote ***Of Plimmoth Plantation*** indicates his familiarity with the literary fashions of his day, especially those of polemical literature, which, even when it affected the plain style, abounded in figures of speech of greater or lesser complexity. A final example of Bradford's fondness for rhetorical embellishment is another excerpt from his speculations as to the apparent breakdown in morality; and this passage immediately follows the one just quoted:

A third reason may be, hear (as I am verily perswaded) is not more evills in this kind, nor nothing nere so many by proportion, as in other places; but they are here more discoverd and seen. ... Besides, here the people are but few in comparison of other places, which are full and populous, and lye hid, as it were, in a wood or thickett, and many horrible evills by that means are never seen nor knowne; whereas hear, they are, as it were, brought into the light, and set in the plaine feeld, or rather on a hill, made conspicuous to the veiw of all.(II, 309-10)

Professional historians of the present century might well frown on Bradford's employment of his very active imagination in presenting and interpreting the history of Plymouth Plantation--a method that he adhered to without inhibitions. For the reader, the result is a view of history as lived and felt by Bradford, whose personality and penetrating mind are everywhere present, despite his policy of hardly ever using his name20 and his avoiding all treatment, even mention, of personal affairs.

**VI. Humor**

One of the most delightful tokens of Bradford's personal presence in ***Of Plimmoth Plantation*** is the humor that now and then appears. Bradford's humor is dry, gently ironic, often marked by understatement--and is not dissimilar to the traditional Yankee humor of later centuries. The lowest-keyed category of his humor consists of laconic remarks, usually at the end of a paragraph, that concern the material just presented. Chapter I describes the Church covenant that the Scrooby Separatists entered into: "whatsoever it should cost them." Bradford then adds: "And that it cost them something this ensewing historie will declare" (I, 22). The "something" was merely their homes, their property, and in many cases their lives.

Already quoted (p. 778) is Bradford's ironic comment about the value of the Archbishop's blessing on the apostate Blackwell and his company, most of whom perished en route to Virginia. Similarly, in discussing a certain Mr. Dermer, an earlier voyager to New England who had supposedly made peace with the Indians, Bradford comments, "but what a peace it was may appeare by what befell him and his men" (I, 206). The fact was that Dermer and his men were attacked and taken prisoner by the Indians, and later, on Martha's Vineyard, Dermer was himself wounded in another Indian attack that cost the lives of all but one of his company.

It might be argued that some of the comments quoted above are not really humorous. Certainly they are not designed to provoke gales of laughter; but, with most readers, as with Bradford himself as he wrote them, a wry smile cannot in some cases be repressed as they read the comment. In other instances, one reacts later, after becoming aware of the events that Bradford anticipated with such laconic understatements.

Frequently, Bradford's remarks are in a much lighter and more obvious vein of humor. Such are his observations on several of the complaints that were made against conditions in Plymouth by a number of dissatisfied "perticulers" who had returned to England. For example, Bradford's rejoinder to the sixth complaint, which was that the water in New England was "not wholsome," was: "If they mean, not so wholsome as the goode beere and wine in London, ... we will not dispute with them; but els, for water, it is as good as any in the world, (for ought we knowe,) and it is wholsome enough to us that can be contente therwith" (I, 363-64). The twelfth complaint, leveled against the abundance of mosquitoes, called forth a light-hearted sarcasm: "They [the settlers] are too delicate and unfitte to begine new-plantations and collonies, that cannot enduer the biting of a muskeeto; we would wish shuch to keepe at home till at least they be muskeeto proofe" (I, 367).

In his delineation of character, Bradford could also bring to bear a real sense of the comic. His description, already discussed, of Lyford's first appearance against the backdrop of the straggling little village of huts on the edge of the forest displays a strong relish for the absurd. Almost equally brilliant as comedy is the figure of Lyford's coconspirator, John Oldham, whose "ramping" and bellowing on the streets of Plymouth and whose second dismissal from Plymouth through a gauntlet of soldiers thumping him "on the brich" (I, 411) with their musket butts are scenes of comedy that bring to mind *The Pickwick Papers.*

Less hilarious but still amusing both to the reader and, clearly, to Bradford is the visit to Plymouth of the Dutch Secretary (second in command to the governor) of New Amsterdam. The pomposity of the secretary had been demonstrated by the incredibly flowery letter he had previously sent--the salutation of which required the equivalent of a fair-sized paragraph, "it being their maner," Bradford duly explains, "to be full of complementall titles" (II, 20). In making his visit, Secretary de Rasiere traveled by boat to Manomet, at the head of Buzzard's Bay twenty miles south of Plymouth, where the Pilgrims maintained a trading post. After reading the Dutch dignitary's letter, one is not surprised that, on landing at this cabin buried in the wilderness, he was "accompanied with a noyse of trumpeters, and some other attendants; and desired that they would send a boat for him, for he could not travill so farr over land" (II, 41-42). Bradford is good-naturedly scornful about the airs of the Dutch, especially of de Rasiere's; but Plymouth indulged on occasion in fanfare of a similar sort, as for example in its greeting Chief Massasoit on his first visit to Plymouth.

Bradford's sense of humor, so evident in ***Of Plimmoth Plantation,*** doubtless was an asset in the vicissitudes of his life as governor of a wilderness outpost with its full share of malcontents and potential rebels against his authority. He and his assistants were capable of quick, strong, decisive and quite humorless actions, as is demonstrated in their dealings with Lyford, Thomas Morton, and any Indians who showed signs of opposing the English occupation of their territory. But on at least one less critical occasion their touch was lighter. This involved the insistence of certain Anglicans in the colony on celebrating Christmas in the traditional English manner. The Separatists, who considered Christmas a popish and pagan abomination, worked that day as hard as on any other. But the

Gov[erno]r tould [the Nonseparatists] that if they made it mater of conscience, he would spare them till they were better informed. So he led-away the rest and left them; but when they came home at noone from their worke, he found them in the streete at play, openly; some pitching the barr, and some at stoole-ball, and shuch like sports. So he went to them, and tooke away their implements, and tould them that it was against his conscience, that they should play and others worke. If they made the keeping of it mater of devotion, let them kepe their houses, but ther should be no gameing or revelling in the streets. Since which time nothing hath been atempted that way, at least openly.(I, 245-46)

Thus by deftly turning their own argument against the Anglicans, Bradford was able to avoid seeming to play the role of a tyrant; and, at the same time, he assuaged the resentment that the workers must have felt at the spectacle of large numbers of their fellow colonists at play. Under the communal system, which obtained at this time (1621), such resentment would inevitably have been generated.

**VII. History as Literature**

Such literary qualities make ***Of Plimmoth Plantation*** more readable than any other early New England history of comparable magnitude and purpose. Beyond a doubt Bradford was consciously striving for literary effect, even though he might have denied that he was doing so. And it is unquestionable that his efforts, no matter how intentionally or unintentionally exerted, made his book pleasant to read. David Levin in *In Defense of Historical Literature* (1967) has explored the relationship of literary merit to the effectiveness of historical writing. Literary merit alone, he concludes, cannot redeem an inaccurate or otherwise deficient work of history, but it can do much to enhance a piece of historical writing that is basically sound. When Levin lists a number of points of view from which literarily effective history may be judged, he finds that the most important among these characteristics are the historian's handling of time relationships, his methods of characterizing individuals and groups, and his ways of emphasizing or focusing upon these events that he considers most significant.21 Much that pertains to these three points has already been touched upon in this study, but something can be gained by summarizing and from drawing conclusions after giving specific attention to them.

In his handling of time relationships Bradford adopted two approaches--one for each of the two books into which ***Of Plimmoth Plantation*** is divided. In Book I, which carries the reader up to the actual founding of Plymouth Colony, his approach is to sketch in the general historical and religious background of the Separatist movement and to single out that movement as an important phase in the Protestant struggle to reform a corrupted Church of Christ. From these broadest concerns and considerations, he quickly focuses upon the tiny church at Scrooby, Nottinghamshire, follows the flight of that congregation to Holland, briefly lingers over its vicissitudes there, becomes more circumstantial as he records its negotiations and preparations for the voyage to America, and recounts in greater detail the events of the voyage, the several weeks of exploration on Cape Cod, and finally the settling at Plymouth. In this brief and fast-moving narrative, much is perforce omitted; but Bradford's purpose is to get the Pilgrims to their New England home and to indicate at the same time how heaven seemed to favor their project in its various phases. His principle of selection was that of most writers of providential history in his time, as has already been discussed; but he does not apply this principle and belabor it as relentlessly as did most of his fellow chroniclers of New England.

In Book II, Bradford carefully announces his plan so far as chronology and selection of details are concerned: "The rest of this history (if God give me life, and opportunitie) I shall, for brevitis sake, handle by way of annalls, noteing only the heads of principall things, and passages as they fell in order of time, and may seeme to be profitable to know, or to make use of. And this may be as the ·2· Booke" (I, 187). He does present the remainder of the book in the form of annals, a common way of writing history in his day; but, relative to his speaking about brevity, he was compelled to observe it since the details of twenty-seven years of the colony's existence as known to him and as readily accessible to him as governor would have required volumes. The town and colony records during that same period of time indicate the plethora of material from which he could have drawn. In short, some principle of selection had to be applied in Book II as well as in Book I.

The principle of selection in this second section seems to have been twofold. There is the providential one on which the author relies to demonstrate the righteousness of the Pilgrims' enterprise and which constitutes the means of focusing on and emphasizing events. Equally important are emphases on human relationships as they developed from individual differences of character and from divergences of outlook and values among various groups--which emphases would correspond to two of the approaches suggested by Levin.

Enough has been said concerning Bradford's highlighting of events, situations, and enterprises in which God's involvement in the Plymouth venture was obvious to the properly pious person. It should be pointed out, however, that he was not as biased in his selection of material to be included as might have been expected. True, he omits most of the facts concerning the wrangling among the Separatists in Amsterdam and he omits all the details of the slaughter of the Indians at Wessagusset. Yet he does not gloss over the outbreaks of wickedness--buggery, adultery, fornication--in Plymouth in 1642. Thus it can be said that, though he is quite selective, he could have been more so in the direction of glorifying the Pilgrim venture and in associating it with the will of God.

Bradford's treatment of individual character has also been rather closely examined and illustrated in this study. His tendency seems to be toward caricature and ridicule in depicting persons whom he disliked, such as Lyford, Weston, Thomas Morton, and Oldham. In the case of those of whom he approves or whom he admires, like William Brewster or John Robinson, he directs the reader's attention to their estimable traits and abilities, and he omits the recording of the human weaknesses they might have had. In general, the admirable characters are members of the Separatist congregation; and in his treatment of the despicable ones, who are either unchurched or have Anglican sympathies, Bradford does attempt to be fair in his unfavorable assessments. But, in depicting both sorts of characters, Bradford does not hesitate to let his personal feelings be known; and he is eminently successful in enlisting the reader's opinion on his side--and the result is that the reader's interest in characters is high. Furthermore, Bradford escapes undue flatness in his characterization by presenting details of appearance or of manner that bring his subject to life--Lyford's cringing and weeping or Oldham's "ramping."

Inevitably, as Bradford presents either his admirable or his objectionable characters, the reader becomes aware of the contrasts between certain pairs of them: between the hypocritical Lyford and the benign Robinson; between the double-dealing Allerton and his trusting father-in-law, William Brewster; between the dependable Squanto and the conspiratorial Corbitant (the "good" and the "bad" Indians). Such contrasts doubtless existed in Bradford's mind, but he may not have deliberately arranged them for the reader. In the case of different groups of people, however, Bradford did very consciously develop contrasts. Thus in Plymouth itself there were two rather sharply divided groups--the "saints," or members of the Separatist church, and the "strangers," or Non-separatists who were attached to the colony for economic or other reasons. Very obviously Bradford held the "saints" in much higher esteem than he did the "strangers," who were often disruptive of the peace of the colony.

There were, of course, many other contrasts. Within the company that sponsored the colony were the adventurers (the merchants who remained in London) and the planters, who endured the hardships of the New World and, according to Bradford, were misused and underappreciated by the adventurers. At Plymouth itself, in addition to the broad, inclusive grouping of "saints" and "strangers," there were those who worked for the common cause of the company; and there were the "perticulers," who worked for their own individual advantage. In contrast to the whole well-ordered, if somewhat heterogeneous, Pilgrim colony was Merry Mount with its total misrule and shocking immorality. Even the Puritans at Massachusetts Bay are contrasted unfavorably with the Separatists of Plymouth, the former being grasping and overbearing and downright unneighborly at times. Comparisons with the Dutch and the French result even more favorably for the people of Plymouth. These and other contrasts served Bradford's purpose, not only of characterizing the various groups but, more importantly for him, of demonstrating the special favor shed by heaven on the Plymouth settlers and especially on the "saints."

Whatever the contributing factors, ***Of Plimmoth Plantation*** stands as a literary work and as a history; the one aspect is inseparable from the other; but neither achieves the very highest rank. Although this work was too much affected by its author's religious and political views to be classed as objective history, it provides a fund of information that would otherwise be unavailable and that has been drawn upon by other historians continuously since Bradford's death. Bradford, of course, was not by profession either a literary man or a historian, but he possessed demonstrable talents and occasionally achieved immensely impressive effects. What does emerge unmistakably from the content and the style of the ***History*** is the character of Bradford himself, who, despite his desire to leave his private life out of his book, informs every sentence he wrote with his own rare qualities of earnestness, humor, shrewdness, and, in some instances, vindictiveness. The reader is very conscious of the varying moods and attitudes of the author--his grief and mirth, his hates and loves, his awareness of God's direction of his own and his people's lives. This was the man who was governor of tiny Plymouth Plantation--a colony the importance of which in American history far exceeds its size--during all but five of its first thirty-six years. The colony's successes and failures are traceable in large measure to him, not only as its strongest leader, but as an embodiment of its Separatist spirit and yeomanly values that underlay its founding.

**Notes**

1Samuel Eliot Morison, editor, William Bradford *Of Plymouth Plantation* (New York, 1952), pp. xxvii-xlii; see also introductory sections of *Bradford's History "Of Plimoth Plantation"* (Boston, 1897), the so-called Commonwealth Edition, prepared "from the original manuscript ... by order of the General Court of Massachusetts" and edited by the Secretary of the Commonwealth.

2M. C. Tyler, *A History of American Literature During the Colonial Period, 1607-1765* (New York, 1909), p. 126 ff.

3*Plymouth Church Records,* I, p. 5.

4Ibid., p.6.

5*History,* I, p. 158 n.

6*Historical Collections; Consisting of State Papers ...* (1792-94; rpt. Freeport, N.Y., 1972), I, pp. 349-73.

7See *Plymouth Church Records,* I, p. 51 n; also *History,* I, p. 158 n.

8Increase Mather does not specifically mention having read Book I. In his "To the Reader" he states: "... I have read a large Manuscript of Governor Bradfords (written with his own hand,) being expressive of what the *first planters* in this countrey met with, whether from the *Heathen* or otherwise, from the year 1620 to the year 1647." *A Relation of the Troubles ...* (1677; rpt. New York, 1972). Increase Mather not only gleaned material from Bradford but on occasion used, without quotation marks, his phrasing and sentences, or even longer passages, almost verbatim (compare Mather's p. 55 with *History,* II, p. 263 ff, and Mather's p. 57 ff with *History,* II, pp. 370-72).

9Morison, pp. xxvii-xxxi; *History,* II, pp. 413-15. See E. F. Bradford, "Conscious Art in Bradford's *History of Plymouth Plantation*" *New England Quarterly,* I (1928), p. 136, for evidence that Cotton Mather used Bradford's *History* while writing his *Magnalia Christi Americana* [1702; rpt. New York, 1967].

10John A. Doyle, ed., *History of the Plimoth Plantation ...* Facsimile Edition (London, 1896), p. 16.

11Ibid.

12Ibid., pp. 14-16. Some of the evidences of revision that Doyle observed might have been changes and corrections made in the manuscript by Thomas Prince while drawing from it for his *Annals of New-England.*

13G. C. Blaxland, *"Mayflower" Essays on the Story of the Pilgrim Fathers as Told in Governor Bradford's MS. History of the Plimoth Plantation ...* (London, 1896), see title page.

14Ibid., p. 101.

15Ibid., p. 105. See note 1, Chapter I, for the alternate theory to the effect that Book I was composed as it now stands, with little or no revision, in a short period during or right after 1630. Differences in handwriting and ink lend support to this theory.

16Perry Miller, *The New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century* (New York, 1939; rpt. Boston, 1961), Chapter XII: "The Plain Style."

17Alexander Young, *Chronicles of the Pilgrim Fathers* (Boston, 1841), pp. 260-61. See also *History,* I, pp. 235-36 n.

18E. F. Bradford, pp. 133-57.

19Ibid., p. 146. See also *History,* I, p. 42 n. Indeed, in a note to the Robinson passage, William Bradford himself refers to Berners's translation of the "Goulden boke" (I, p. 42), which had inspired John Lyly's *Euphues* (1578).

20Bradford refers to himself by name at the time he is elected governor after Carver's death (I, p. 216) and in connection with his surrender (in March 1640/41) of the Plymouth Patent, which had been granted solely to him, to the freemen of the colony. In both these instances, it will be noted, he cited his name only in relationship to highly official, or public, matters. His name, of course, does appear in documents and letters that he quotes. He uses the pronoun *I* quite frequently in his narrative or expository passages. See Blaxland, p. 109.

21David Levin *In Defense of Historical Literature* (New York, 1967), Chapter I, "The Literary Criticism of History," p. 1-33.

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