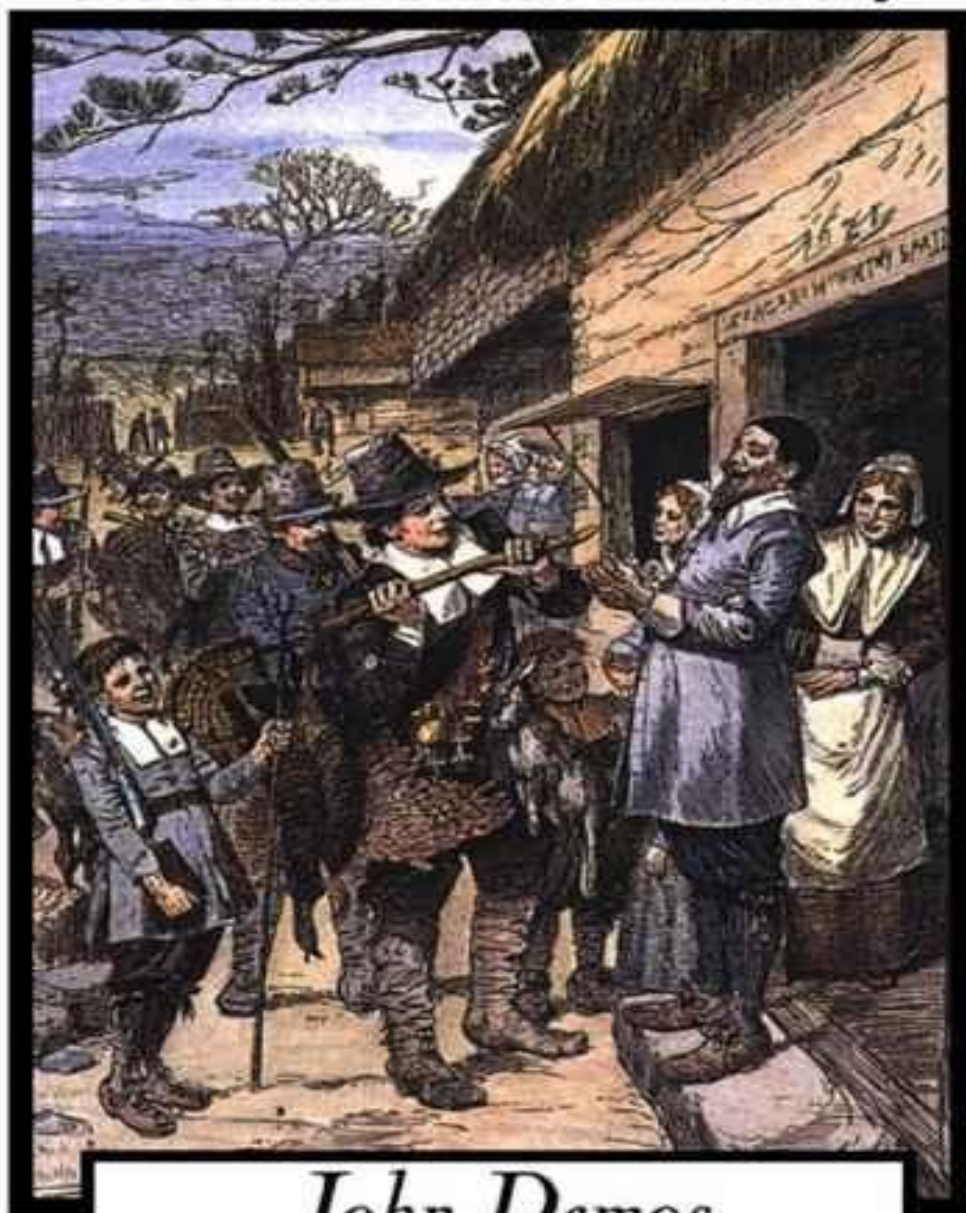


A Little Commonwealth

Family Life in Plymouth Colony

New Edition Thirtieth Anniversary



John Demos

A BANCROFT PRIZE-WINNING AUTHOR

**A LITTLE
COMMONWEALTH**

Family Life in Plymouth Colony

SECOND EDITION



John Demos

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For my Mother
and
For the Memory of My Father

FOREWORD

to the Second Edition



Books of history have their own histories. And this one's is more peculiar than most. From doubtful and problematic beginnings, to an unexpectedly wide reception, through a remarkably extended publishing life, it has surprised me again and again. Now, it springs a further surprise: At the venerable age of thirty, it will be reborn in a new edition.

At first, I had no thought of a book at all. A graduate seminar paper (1963) grew modestly into a scholarly article (1965) which, in turn, caught the eye of the staff at Plimoth Plantation (the first outdoor museum near the site of the famous "Pilgrim" settlement of 1620). Plantation officials then proposed a further stage: to extend the published article into a piece for their pamphlet series on early Plymouth history. The work they envisioned would directly engage the questions of Plantation visitors, around the general topic of "domestic life."

These outward inducements were mixed, of course, with an author's own, more interior, intention. My initial focus (in the seminar paper) had been the demography of Plymouth families. To that end I had canvassed large heaps of vital records, performed the analytic technique known to scholars as "family reconstitution," and developed my results into a variety of graphs and tables. Though never a skilled practitioner of "quantitative history," I did (and do) recognize the power of numbers to establish a baseline for past experience.

The Plantation, for its part, was centrally concerned with material life: the physical surroundings, the objects, the artifacts. And this sent me off in a very different direction—toward what scholars have come to call "material culture history." I spent most of one summer exploring the Plantation exhibits, talking with its guides and docents, and learning as best I could from the published work of archaeologists, architectural historians, and experts on such seemingly arcane matters as furniture, clothing, tools, and household crafts. (This was, indeed, the start of a lasting love affair with the "things" of early America, a passion that grips me still.)

Meanwhile, my deepest interest all along was another aspect entirely: the psychology, the whole many-sided emotional dimension, of family. But I saw this as a particularly difficult challenge. A year of intensive, graduate-level study in psychology, including an extraordinary seminar with the psychoanalyst Erik Erikson, would be needed to prepare me. And Erikson's own writings on "psychohistory" would become both guide and inspiration for my subsequent efforts with Plymouth.

When, at last, I was ready to write, I could only hope that these various approaches might somehow conjoin to make a package. A more immediate problem was their aggregate size. My pile of draft

pages quickly outgrew its “pamphlet” specifications; for better or worse, it would have to be a book. My sponsors at Plimoth Plantation swallowed hard and accepted the change. But their publisher balked. The larger study I was now creating raised new questions of production—and of sale. And when the work was fully done, the publisher declined to take it.

In that dark moment . . . enter a different publisher, Oxford University Press, in the reassuring form of Sheldon Meyer. Sheldon’s preeminence among History editors is now widely acknowledged, but both of us were rookies back then. That he was willing to chance it with such a young and untested scholar—peddling such a decidedly unorthodox project—remains for me something of a miracle. By chance it he, and Oxford, did. A contract was offered, and a book produced, on the cusp between succeeding decades.

Publication brought further surprises, all of them gratifying. For one thing, readers would be more numerous and varied than any of us (especially that first, unwilling publisher) had foreseen. Without quite meaning to, I had written a “crossover” book—the kind that might appeal to “generalists” (including students) as well as my fellow scholars. This factor, more than any other, would ensure its in-print longevity.

But, most striking and most important of all was the context in which the book would be received. Almost at once it was lumped with others as part of a new historical mini-genre, which took the name “community studies.” The impulse for this lumping was simple enough: Several different works, all published within the space of mere months, seemed to converge in offering detailed portraits of particular early American communities. Though their thematic and methodological emphasis varied, all were joined in privileging depth over breadth, and analysis over narrative description. In the years to follow, community studies would sprout and blossom across a very broad scholarly range. A working conference organized under that rubric at Brandeis University in 1972 produced a truly astonishing response. Eighty-eight different historians, each with a community study in progress (or prospect), came together to share ideas, experience, and a mutually reinforcing excitement.

In the final event, the stakes were higher still. Suddenly (or so it seemed to me) scholars began to speak of a “new social history”—in which, again, my book could claim some part. The “new” in this case necessarily implied an “old,” and the boundary between them was not always clear. But three elements appeared to be central: a strong focus on everyday life and ordinary people; a central role for analysis and interpretation; and a readiness to borrow both theory and method from the social sciences.

As the new currents gathered force, their reach expanded dramatically. From New England to other early American sites. From the colonial to the national period. From social experience to political, economic, or religious (or what have you) behavior. For a time it was possible to imagine a virtual *imperium* of new scholarship, something that might transform the entire discipline.

Such at least was the prospect envisioned, in giddy moments, by early advocates and practitioners. But, inevitably, questions would arise—and a reaction would set in. The questions were of many sorts. Some embraced method: Clearly, there were difficulties in transferring concepts and research strategies across disciplinary frontiers. Others went to language: As technical terms and phrases proliferated throughout the new histories, their audience shrank to ever smaller groups of specialists. But most troubling of all was the specter of spreading “fragmentation.” New studies, however ingenious in conception and sophisticated in technique, seemed endlessly to divide and subdivide the historical landscape. As individual flowers grew tall in their exotic myriads, the garden itself disappeared from view. Increasingly, by the late 1970s, historians as a whole drew back—or paused to take a second look. And, by the early 80s, the momentum of the “new” was clearly spent.

Fast-forward, now, to the late 1990s. Much has changed—in the author, in the overall historical enterprise, in the shape of the Academy. The new social history, like all of its first proponents, has grayed considerably. Shrunken in scope, and shorn of its most excessive claims, it belongs now to the scholarly mainstream. Quantification—to take the most obvious example—is no longer a war waged in the battle for and against reform. Few would deny its uses here and there, but none would argue for its importance everywhere. Moreover, its interior parts—the details of method and technique—have been substantially refined over the years. In short, quantitative history is both smaller and better than it was before. Psychohistory, meanwhile, has undergone a similar transformation. Its early and often blatantly reductive boasts are heard no more. Yet studies that treat the question of human motive—for instance, biographies—increasingly, even routinely, borrow from psychological theory (and practice). And so, too, with work on material culture. In truth, this last track has been slower to merge with other scholarship; but the process seems, just recently, to have been moving forward with impressive speed.

The author, meanwhile, has changed his own professional stance quite drastically. Though still a believer in rigorously analytic approaches, and though deeply grateful for my previous involvement that way, I have (re)discovered an interest in the historian's ancient practice of narrative. As the new has become old, the old is—for me at least—again new.

And what of the book itself? To be sure, it wears a new jacket; but what of the body that lies underneath? No doubt, some parts could be changed, and possibly a few *should* be changed. It is undeniably tempting to trim and tuck, to add and subtract, in response to developing scholarly fashions—or even to some apparent advance-in-knowledge. For all that, I have chosen to let the work stand as I wrote it three decades ago. Books, I think, have a kind of integrity, deriving from the particular circumstances of their creation. Eventually, of course, they must all topple and die; but until that day comes, they can be allowed to make their way without substantial in-course adjustments.

Besides, most of what is written here appears to me to have survived time's test. The parts that seemed newest and riskiest in 1970 have become, as noted, progressively mainstreamed. Indeed, some of these parts have been bolstered by more recent work from different hands. The result, in broad terms, is a steady accretion of knowledge about early American family life. What this book aims to show for Plymouth people can now be compared to family patterns in other "Puritan" settlements, Quaker communities of the Middle Colonies, among planters and yeomen of the early South, and African-American and Native American groups of similar historical location. (See Bibliography, p. xiii.) There is no easy way to add up the score here. In some respects, the keynote is difference (Family demography, for instance: Thus the favorable conditions of seventeenth-century Plymouth contrast sharply with what scholars have discovered for the early Chesapeake.) In others, there is pervasive sameness (e.g., gender relations, with male preference being, virtually everywhere, the central theme). In all these areas, moreover, ample room remains for further work.

In the meantime, it is gratifying to think that *A Little Commonwealth* still has a contribution to make—and a role to play. I hope readers can experience some of the same pleasures of discovery that I had in writing the book many years ago.

Tyringham, Massachusetts
November 1998

J. P.

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FOREWORD

to the First Edition



The kind of study presented in this monograph has not as yet won a wide following among working historians. On the whole their interest has remained with the larger units of social action: the region, the class, the party, the ethnic or religious group. It has been left to the so-called behavioral sciences—anthropology, sociology, psychology—to demonstrate the fundamental importance of the smaller and most intimate of all group environments, the family.

Like most generalizations this one admits of certain important exceptions. Two outstanding books on the history of early American family life come to mind immediately, one published in 1944, the other in 1960.¹ Moreover, antiquarians and genealogists have long been concerned with particular aspects of particular families. And, during the past few years, there have been signs of a more concerted effort in the same overall direction from a new generation of historians, influenced in part by the work of certain European colleagues, and in part by the ideas of the behavioral scientists.² Yet taken altogether, this work has not been enough to stake out a definite area of study, with its own boundaries, internal structure, and guiding themes and questions. There is as yet no sense of the major outlines of the story, and little agreement even about research procedures, source materials, and terminology.

In the face of so many uncertainties one response, more instinctive than reasoned, has been to descend to the level of local, almost personal history. It has seemed important to try to know average people in the everyday routine of their lives, in order to begin to understand their behavior in a family setting. Research of this kind bears at least a surface resemblance to the work of the antiquarians and in fact it draws quite heavily on materials that the latter have uncovered. But its purpose is different in an obvious and essential way; it aims ultimately for general answers, for a picture of *the* family rather than any single instance thereof.

My own work with Plymouth Colony is offered very much in the same spirit. This is, it seems, an unabashedly local study, for I have sought at every point to develop my analysis with materials indigenous to Plymouth. When, moreover, it has seemed helpful to refer to analogous circumstances in other colonies or regions, I have tried to do so quite explicitly—even apologetically. Yet at the same time I do hold to a larger purpose, and am somewhat concerned lest the title and subtitle of this book suggest merely one more exercise in antiquarianism. The danger is perhaps the greater when one has chosen to take as subjects the people of the “Old Colony” (as it has been known for many generations), the “Pilgrims” of fond and venerable legend. Let me therefore be quite candid about my

belief that family life in Plymouth was not at all unique. There were, I think, broad lines of similarity to the typical case in the other American colonies, particularly those embraced by the term “Puritanism.” The family is, after all, an extremely fundamental and durable institution: it often provides a kind of common denominator, or baseline, for a whole culture whose various parts may differ substantially in other respects. In short, I have wished to write a type of “case study” in early American family life—a study which, through sustained work on materials from one community, produces questions, methods of approach, and even some substantive conclusions that will ultimately have a much wider application.

Most investigations of family life in the fairly distant past are bedeviled by one fundamental circumstance: the subject is something which the people of the time took so much for granted that it seemed to require little formal comment. The situation for Plymouth does, however, present certain hopeful possibilities; and it may be well to indicate here, at the outset, the three types of source material on which I have relied most heavily. First, there are the physical artifacts that remain from the seventeenth century—houses (and house foundations), furniture, tools, utensils, clothing, and the like. Second, there is a large assortment of wills and inventories—documents which reveal much not only about the possessions of the colonists, but also about the inner relationships between different members of given families. And, third, there are the official records of the Colony (and also the records of individual towns). However, each kind of source carries with it certain inherent difficulties for the historian. The physical remains are quite literally dumb; one sees the object, but cannot automatically know all that its owner did with it or understand for certain the importance that he attached to it. The wills and inventories tend to reveal the most formal level of family interaction; it is only rarely that personal and emotional factors can be directly glimpsed. The Court records necessarily carry a kind of negative bias: they tell us what the community disapproved.

Conspicuously missing from this checklist of sources are the literary materials—published books and essays, speeches, letters, journals, and other forms of personal comment and opinion—which often bulk largest in historical research. But this is precisely the kind of evidence which usually comes in short supply with regard to questions of family life—and particularly so in the case of Plymouth. There is only one such source that I have found consistently helpful in my own study; namely, the various essays collected in the *Works* of John Robinson, the original Pilgrim pastor.³ There are also a few pertinent references in William Bradford’s famous history,⁴ but virtually nothing in the other written sources from the period.

Perhaps, however, this is not a wholly unfortunate circumstance for Edmund Morgan’s excellent monograph, *The Puritan Family* (already cited above), can reasonably be appropriated to fill the void. Morgan has made good use of a fairly substantial body of literary materials from the early history of Massachusetts Bay—chiefly the sermons and essays of leading clergymen in that colony. It is safe to assume that the opinions expressed by such men would have found a ready assent at Plymouth as well, and they can, I think, stand in lieu of any statements by comparable figures in the Old Colony. Indeed, at the risk of seeming presumptuous, I venture to hope that my own work on Plymouth will be considered as broadly complementary to the Morgan book. Our findings, while not identical, make a good overall fit; yet our rather different angles of approach give each book a kind of independent basis. Perhaps, in the end, there is one perceptible difference with respect to subject matter as well. For Morgan’s extensive use of literary materials may tend to weight his conclusions toward the more affluent and educated class of people (particularly given a society that was only partially literate).

whereas I, lacking such evidence for Plymouth, have tried quite self-consciously to reach the life of the "average man." But if this is so, it simply augments the complementary relationship between the two studies.

Every piece of historical research is an undertaking partly of description and partly of analysis, and I would like to use this opportunity to introduce certain methodological intentions which I have tried to apply to each side of my task. With regard to description, I have wished especially to limit the element of impressionistic presentation so common in historical writing—the tendency to offer a general statement followed (or preceded) by a small number of illustrative "examples." The drawbacks inherent in this method are obvious and constitute the chief argument for attempting to use "quantitative" measures whenever possible. Of course, in dealing with questions about the fairly distant past the historian usually finds only limited or fragmentary data; and, as I have been forced to recognize again and again in my work on Plymouth, there is often simply no alternative to the impressionistic approach. Still, in some particular matters I have contrived to present the situation in quantitative terms. Most such statements represent a "best possible guess" on the basis of material that I have assembled about the lives of some 2000 Old Colony residents. Any *single* statement embraces only a part of the total sample, since for most individuals the information is not complete. Therefore none of this can be taken as definitive in the true meaning of the word. The chance to render precise statistical judgments, subject to careful verification, extends only to students of contemporary society (or perhaps of very recent history). But I do feel that such measures can be strongly suggestive, even for communities three hundred years in the past. In the particular case of the history of the family, they introduce a greater degree of precision into a field which heretofore has been widely influenced by popular myth, and indeed by the most careless sort of guesswork.

In the analytic side of their task historians usually profess, and practice, an essentially *ad hoc* intuitive approach; and I have certainly presented my fair share of judgments of this type in the pages that follow. However, I have also tried at certain points to fit the evidence from Plymouth with appropriate *theoretical* models. Most of these are borrowed from the various branches of behavioral science in which the study of family life has been more extensively pursued. The historian's fundamental commitment to the study of individual facts, rather than the discovery of broad conceptual constructs, seems to me clear—and unexceptionable. But there is no reason why he cannot use theory to help with any given undertaking—in short, as a means to his own particular ends.

There are, to be sure, certain problems with this type of interdisciplinary borrowing, and one of the most immediate is the problem of language. The special terminologies of the relevant work in the behavioral sciences cannot easily be relocated in the midst of the usual historical narrative; and I have tried, whenever necessary, not only to transplant, but to *translate* as well. I am not sure that I have always succeeded in this, but I do recognize the objections, both aesthetic and practical, to any real indiscriminate pattern of exchange.

And another sort of caution must also be entered here. I am a little fearful that the use of "theory" may seem to give an unduly speculative or hypothetical cast to certain parts of my discussion. But so, I trust that they will be read in the spirit in which they were written—namely, as plausible, and useful, ways to make sense of materials that might otherwise be left to lie inert and unexplained. All of this reflects my own conviction that historians must be ready to consider interpretative hypotheses, and even "hunches" that go some distance beyond the known facts. If, for example, a critic were to say to me that my argument in a later section does not finally establish the particular

importance of “autonomy” in the development of Puritan children, I could only agree. But the demand for certainty—or at least for “proof”—while reasonable and laudable as a long-range goal, need not be rigidly maintained at every stage of historical inquiry. Proof is relative in any case—and scholars should never, in my opinion, dismiss an important problem because of “insufficient data.” Particularly in the newer fields of research (like the history of the family), the framing of significant questions and of their probable answers may help to speed the recovery of the essential pieces of evidence. We must be ready to ponder what is *likely* to have happened—when more certain knowledge is lacking. We may then hope that future research in the same general area will turn up additional materials that serve either to strengthen such interpretations, or to modify them, or to put them down for good.

I want, finally, to say something about the overall plan of the book. An initial decision of considerable importance concerned the matter of organization; and, for two reasons, I chose to adopt a topical principle rather than a chronological one. All things considered, this seemed a better way to lend prominence to the analytic themes and issues, which in my own mind form a central part of the work. But, in addition, this choice can probably be justified by reference to the nature of the subject matter itself. I have already suggested that the family usually wears an aspect of similarity across a broad reach of geographical space within a single culture, and the same thing can be said of the time dimension as well. Change in the fundamental structure and character of family life always comes extremely slowly; in the language of anthropology, we are talking here of one of those “primary institutions” whose essential durability normally lends coherence to a wide range of more visible cultural processes.⁵ It would therefore be hard to construct a meaningful account of this subject on the basis of development through time, especially with terminal points that are less than a century apart. In some specific areas where change *was* discernible, and important, I have tried to call attention to the fact. But in the long run this is a story in which elements of stability and continuity loom unusually large.

Thus my book begins with a brief introductory essay which purports to offer a kind of overview of Plymouth Colony history. This, I hope, will be useful as “context” for the more focused and detailed discussion which follows; but readers already familiar with the story of the Old Colony may want to skip ahead to the main section of the text. Part One is an attempt to delineate the physical “stage” on which family life was acted out, to contrive a visual picture of the settlers as they went about their daily business. Part Two presents a discussion of the actual membership of Plymouth households, and the relationship in which individuals stood to one another within particular families. Part Three describes some of the major themes in the development of a typical settler from birth, through youth and adulthood, to old age and finally to death itself. And a concluding chapter evaluates, in a more general way, the fundamental sources of strength and of strain in these seventeenth-century families with particular reference to their place in the community at large.

This whole project has been nourished from the start by the generosity of many friends, colleagues, and institutions. An important measure of financial assistance came originally from the Massachusetts Society of Mayflower Descendants, and was arranged through the good offices of Plimoth Plantation, Inc. The Plantation supplemented this grant out of its own funds, and has also provided many other forms of aid—clerical, editorial, administrative—as well as a simple but necessary kind of sympathetic encouragement. In this connection I would particularly like to thank Arthur Pyle and

James Deetz, both of whom have followed the research from its inception and have examined the final product with discerning care. Among the others who have read and evaluated the manuscript, either in part or in whole, are Oscar Handlin, Philip Greven, Douglas Leach, Tamara Hareven, George Langdon, and Cary and Barbara Carson. Their thoughtful comments and criticisms have enabled me to improve my argument in a number of important particulars. Of course, in at least a few instances I have stubbornly clung to my original formulation; and for this and other reasons I hasten to discharge the burden of any larger responsibility for the book as it finally stands. I profited at an early stage from a long discussion of Plymouth Colony architecture with Richard Candee. Staff members at Pilgrim Hall and the Harlow House helped me to learn about the material artifacts of seventeenth-century life, and also allowed me to use photographs from both sites. Similar photographic permissions were granted by the committee in charge of the Major John Bradford House in Kingston. The pictures (at least some of them) were taken at my behest by Robert I. Frank. Rose T. Briggs of the Plymouth Antiquarian Society spent a whole afternoon initiating me into the mysteries of spinning, candle-making, and other domestic processes. Dr. Robert McGandy steered me to some important research in his own field (public health) bearing on questions of human fertility. Finally, Brandeis University provided funds for typing the manuscript and for the photography. To all these people and institutions I am indeed most grateful.

One last kind of indebtedness is extremely hard to specify, though it may well be the most important of all. All men have families of their own—even historians—and the personal ramifications of working on this particular subject are correspondingly complex. I have sensed at times that the idiosyncratic concerns of my own might subtly intrude themselves in such a way as to distort my reading of the seventeenth-century family. This is what psychologists call “projection” and all scholars whose research touches the more intimate dimensions of human experience must watch carefully for its appearance. I cannot be sure that I have wholly suppressed it. At the same time I feel that any worthwhile insight this book may possess grows, in an absolutely essential way, from my experience with the members of my family. I had long anticipated the pleasure of writing this dedication to my parents; now, at almost the last moment, the pleasure has been suddenly crossed with grief. Words seem a most inadequate resource in the struggle to come to terms with death; but I want to express in this way my continuing affirmation of all the good and profound things that my father and I have been able to share. The contributions of my wife are many and diverse—and immeasurable. She was from the start an invaluable source of new ideas and perspectives, a patient tutor in all my efforts to forage in the thickets of the behavioral sciences, and a careful critic of my prose style. But most of all, she has always been there when it counted.

J.D.

*Watertown, Mass.
September, 1969*

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“. . . a familie is a little Church, and a little commonwealth, at least a lively representation thereof whereby triall may be made of such as are fit for any place of authoritie, or of subjection in Church or commonwealth. Or rather it is as a schoole wherein the first principles and grounds of government and subjection are learned: whereby men are fitted to greater matters in Church or commonwealth.”

William Gouge
Of Domesticall Duties (London, 1622)

INTRODUCTION: AN HISTORICAL SURVEY OF PLYMOUTH COLONY





“Being thus arrived in a good harbor, and brought safe to land, they fell upon their knees and blessed the God of Heaven, who had brought them over the vast and furious ocean, and delivered them from all the perils and miseries thereof, again to set their feet on the firm and stable earth, their proper element.”¹

With these words William Bradford described the arrival of the Pilgrims in Provincetown harbor, the first landfall in the New World. Their story, in broad outline, has of course become a familiar one to many later generations of Americans. The *Mayflower*, the Compact, Plymouth Rock, Squanto, the romance of John and Priscilla Alden: all this belongs now to an important segment of what might be called our mythic national identity. Strangely, however, the formal scholarship of this subject has been quite limited. There was, for example, no full-length history of Plymouth Colony, conforming to accepted criteria of professional research, until very recently.² It is almost as if the aura of legend surrounding the Pilgrim settlers makes them difficult to recover as live human beings, caught up in a round of routine, everyday activities. Yet in most respects they were ordinary men of their time, and their experience was fundamentally similar to that of their neighbors in other colonies to the north and south. Indeed it might even be argued that this very quality—the whole thread of slow, steady, and unremarkable development—makes Plymouth an especially good “laboratory” for the study of early American life.

If any aspect of their history seemed to set off this particular group of settlers, it was the experience *before* reaching the New World. Their “pilgrimage” began with the formation of a distinctive type of religious community in England near the start of the seventeenth century, and led them to an initial period of voluntary exile in Holland. They belonged, of course, to the large movement called Puritanism, and more particularly they were “separatists.”³ This meant that they declined any fellowship with the established church of the realm and sought instead to practice a more austere form of “congregational” piety purged of the various corruptions that still (in their eyes) infested Anglicanism.

The nucleus of the original Pilgrim settlers was drawn from Scrooby, England, a small community about 150 miles to the north of London. They formed one of several separatist congregations in the area; and like the others, they were subjected to increasing levels of harassment by state authorities during the early years of the reign of King James I. By the summer of 1607 they had decided to remove themselves to Holland, where, in a climate of general toleration unusual for that era, they might be free to worship as they wished. After a brief stay in Amsterdam, they settled down to a sparse, but relatively tranquil, existence in the city of Leyden. There they remained for more than a decade. For the most part, it seems, they were allowed to go their own way; but they experienced a sense of strangeness and confinement that is perhaps unavoidable in any refugee community. They worried about their children growing up in an alien land. They chafed at their straitened economic circumstances, the need to work unceasingly in order to maintain a living standard that was little more than bare subsistence; and they wondered if they were growing old before their time. They observed

with sorrow that few of their fellow communicants still in England cared to join them in this general unpromising situation.⁴ For such reasons they reached, in time, the decision to move once again. Now they would travel the whole breadth of the Atlantic Ocean—with the hope of re-establishing themselves in a land nominally English but effectively beyond the reach of regular state and ecclesiastical power.

But this was a large project, requiring a substantial measure of outside assistance. The colonists would need, in the first place, a “patent” from one of the chartered trading companies which the Crown had invested with official control over New World “plantations.” They would need to recruit additional personnel. And above all they would need money—both to finance the actual voyage, and to maintain the settlement until it was able to become fully self-supporting. Negotiations began on several fronts in 1617, but were immediately beset with various forms of disappointment and delay. The financial problem was especially troublesome. The Pilgrims finally struck a bargain with a group of London merchants headed by an ironmonger named Thomas Weston, but on terms that seemed distressingly harsh. The entire output of the settlement was to remain common property for a period of seven years, with the bulk of the “dividends” to go to the Weston group. Months of bitter haggling over these terms set a pattern that would continue, in the relations of the “planters” and the “adventurers,” for many years thereafter.⁵ Finally in 1620, unwilling to wait longer for a more favorable arrangement, an advance guard of 102 settlers embarked on the little *Mayflower* and set their course for the New World.

The settlers knew that the task of colonization would not be easy, but they could scarcely have imagined the extremity of the hardships that awaited them. They reached Plymouth a little before Christmas, just as winter was setting in. Weakened by the long period of confinement and inadequate nourishment on shipboard, they found soon enough that their very survival was in question. Sicknesse swept through the entire company, and within six months nearly half of them were dead. The arrival of spring seemed to bring a change in their luck. The tide of illness abated, and the survivors turned their thoughts toward planting. They were befriended by groups of Indians living nearby (including Squanto), and they derived from this source invaluable advice on local conditions for hunting, fishing, and agriculture. They would never again be quite so desperate as during that first winter, but for several years each new infusion of settlers placed heavy strains on their limited stores of provisions.

There were, too, worrisome kinds of *social* strain. Even while the *Mayflower* was still at sea, “mutinous speeches” had been heard from a few of its passengers, and the famous Compact was a direct response to this threat of divisiveness. The signers of the Compact formally bound themselves together into a “Civil Body Politic” and agreed to be ruled by laws “most meet and convenient for the general good.” But even so, almost from the first days ashore there were renewed “discontents and murmurings,” which the leadership could not finally dispel.⁶ In fact, the Plymouth community was never as homogeneous as has usually been imagined. There were in the first group a number of “strangers”—people not primarily committed to religious aims and values—in contrast to the “pilgrims” themselves. In subsequent years there came others known as “particulars” because they had paid their own (“particular”) way and could not therefore be asked to share in the debts of the Colony as a whole. Some individual “strangers” and “particulars” became trusted and valued citizens, but others continued to seem different and more or less suspect. They formed a kind of “out-group” and remained a reservoir of potential recruits for any insurgent movement that might arise within the Colony. Thus, for example, the storm of controversy aroused in 1625 by the Rev. John Lyford, the first clergyman to come to Plymouth, seems to have taken shape along the lines of cleavage between

regular “planters” and “particulars.”⁷ This was a uniquely vivid case of conflict, but perhaps in other smaller and more subterranean ways the same struggle was continually re-enacted through the early years of the Colony.

These early years were, necessarily, a time of some uncertainty and flux in the affairs of Plymouth. With social divisions present from the start, and with few clear precedents for the organization of an entirely new settlement, it could hardly have been otherwise. But by about 1640 the Colony had begun to achieve a measure of stability, at least in institutional terms. An underlying framework of Church and State, validated by the test of experience, was increasingly evident. There would, of course, be alterations in some parts of this framework during the years ahead, but its chief structural characteristics seemed established.

The ultimate unit of political participation and power was the individual “freeman.” This was a formal status for which all adult male householders might directly apply. Approval was based on general considerations of character and competence; unlike the Massachusetts Bay Colony, Plymouth set no specific requirements in terms of church membership. Some applications did not succeed (for reasons that unfortunately went unrecorded), but recent research has suggested that a majority were accepted.⁸ Initially the “freemen” themselves composed the General Court, which enacted all necessary “laws and ordinances,” voted “rates” (taxes), and (after 1640) supervised the distribution of lands. In 1638 the Colony switched to a system of representation, whereby the householders of each town elected “deputies” to serve on the Court. Within the Court a place of special eminence was accorded the “magistrates”—the Governor and his seven Assistants. These men, chosen annually, formed the highest judicial body in the Colony, and (especially during the early years) exercised considerable day-to-day administrative authority as well. Over time the powers officially vested in the Assistants would contract somewhat, but they retained great influence of an informal kind. Sometimes their policies were rejected by the rest of the General Court, occasionally they themselves were voted out of office; by and large, however, they provided an enduring and respected form of leadership for the community as a whole. Clearly in most matters of wider significance their opinions were decisive. Within this group the Governor was a strong first among equals. No man in the history of Plymouth Colony wielded such influence as William Bradford (who was Governor during most of the years between 1621 and 1656); but later governors, like Thomas Prentice, were also powerful figures.

More important to the average person than these Colony-wide institutions were the various systems of town government. The fundamental agency here was the “meeting” of all resident householders convened at regular intervals to debate and vote “orders” relevant to common needs and purposes. Most towns elected a group of “selectmen” to manage their affairs during the periods between meetings. A variety of lesser offices were also created (largely on English models)—fence-viewers, surveyors of highways, raters, constables, a treasurer; and *ad hoc* committees were frequently appointed to attend to some special question. These institutions arose more or less spontaneously since there was no explicit provision for them in the early laws of the Colony. Indeed the General Court often seemed reluctant to recognize them; the right of towns to choose selectmen, for instance, was not formally authorized until 1665.

Equally central to the life of local communities was, of course, the church. Each town was also a “congregation” (or, in later years, two or three congregations), and its corporate sense of itself depended largely on common traditions of religious belief and worship. The churches of Plymouth, like Puritan churches elsewhere, maintained a fundamental distinction between those who had been

“converted” and “owned the covenant,” and those who had not. Only the former were eligible for church membership. Yet these standards were applied rather liberally—more so, perhaps, than in some of the churches of Massachusetts Bay. Individual candidates were asked to make some profession as to their inner experience of God’s grace, but they were not required to submit to any detailed cross-examination. Thus in practice a considerable part of the adult population would soon or later become church members.

Each of the churches in the Old Colony managed its own affairs and resisted on principle any idea of a larger system of ecclesiastical control. Each church hired its own minister, determined the order of its service, and conducted a variety of administrative business. It also sat in judgment on the errands of its own membership. Its records were dotted with motions of censure and (less often) with formal proceedings of excommunication. The range of offenses was considerable: fornication, swearing, drunkenness, “insolency,” and other types of “scandalous carriage.” While censure and excommunication carried no legal force outside the congregation and did not necessarily lead to civil or criminal prosecution, they were still effective sanctions. At the very least they must have imposed a degree of social ostracism on the individuals directly involved.

To sketch, as we have just now been doing, the various institutional systems of Plymouth Colony is to emphasize those aspects of life which most clearly expressed the whole theme of control. The General Court considering the admission of new freemen, the Court of Assistants punishing a man for slander, the town ordering the repair of broken fences, the church voting to censure a wayward communicant—here are images enough of authority, of discipline, even of repression. All this was real and important in the day-by-day experience of the settlers, but it was only *one side* of the experience. Unfortunately, too, it is the side to which an earlier era of scholarship gave an excessive, almost exclusive, kind of attention. But if we look carefully, if, in particular, we try to keep individual lives clearly in focus, we gradually uncover a rather different set of themes and tendencies. We uncover an area of life that was profoundly characterized by elements of movement and change—indeed by a kind of fluidity that is commonly associated with a much later period in our nation’s history.

No aspect of this situation seems more striking in retrospect than the simple factor of geographic mobility. Some of the original Plymouth settlers began to take up lots across the river in Duxbury even before 1630; among them were such prominent figures as John Alden, Myles Standish, and Jonathan Brewster. The process was accelerated by the establishment to the north of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. An important new market for cattle and corn was thereby opened up, and the compact town of Plymouth was not large enough to meet the demand for increased production. In 1636 the town of Scituate was officially incorporated, and by the end of the next decade eight more new towns had been established. The direction of the earliest expansion was north and south along the coast; then a westerly thrust began, which led to the founding of such towns as Taunton, Rehoboth, Bridgewater, and Middleborough, all well inland. Still other groups of people pushed onto Cape Cod, and indeed in the early 1640s there was a move to abandon the original settlement at Plymouth altogether and relocate the town on the outer cape. This proposal was finally defeated after much discussion at the meetings of the freemen, but some families went anyway, on their own, and founded the town of Eastham.

These events greatly distressed some of the leaders of the Colony, who believed that the achievement of their goals, the whole effort to establish a truly Godly community, would depend on maintaining a close and compact pattern of settlement. Periodically they sought to stem the tide. Thus on several occasions when new land was parceled out, the General Court directed that it be used on

for actual settlement by the grantees themselves.⁹ Also the Court criticized the unrestrained way in which lands were distributed by the freemen in certain of the newer townships. Grants were no longer confined to upright, religious-minded settlers; towns accepted, with no questions asked, almost anyone who proposed to move in.¹⁰ William Bradford was one of the people to whom all of this came as a keen disappointment; it runs through his famous history of Plymouth as a kind of tragic refrain: “This I fear will be the ruin of New England, at least of the churches of God there,” he wrote at one point, “and will provoke the Lord’s displeasure against them.”¹¹ When the plan for moving the town to Eastham was debated, Bradford, and others of like mind, discerned the real motive behind the proposal: “Some were still for staying together in this place, alleging men might here live if they would be content with their condition, and that it was not for want or necessity so much that they were removed as for the enriching of themselves.”¹²

Yet the process of dispersion, begun so very early, was never halted. The magnetic influence of the empty land was too powerful, and people of every age and condition yielded to it. They moved sometimes as individuals and sometimes in groups, edging further and further away from the original center at Plymouth. New towns arose in the wilderness and were chartered, albeit reluctantly, by the General Court.¹³ There were also numerous smaller villages and hamlets, that went officially unrecognized but grew and prospered nonetheless. The physical aspect of the Old Colony after two centuries seems to have been rather arbitrary and disorganized, with a straggling chain of settlements of varying shapes and sizes, and even some isolated homesteads, flung out over a very broad expanse of territory.¹⁴

The dispersion of settlement was part of a larger change whereby the community left behind the ideals of the first settlers—a change which another student of the period has aptly described as leading “from Puritan to Yankee.”¹⁵ The motion was spiritual as well as spatial: this, of course, is what most like Bradford sensed in pleading so strenuously against it. Yet the overall trend was a very gradual one, and its effects became clear only with the passage of several generations. Indeed the danger for us, from our vantage point of three centuries later, is that we may fail to appreciate the forces of tradition, the old ways and values—and especially the power of religion. No part of our imaginative effort at historical reconstruction is more difficult. For like the life of the family, the life of religion—especially its interior dimensions, its reverberations in the thoughts and feelings and behavior of the average believer—was not systematically recorded.¹⁶

We should not therefore be surprised if, in the investigations that follow, religion seems to figure in a somewhat haphazard and occasional way. It was simply too basic, too much an assumed constant of life to be rendered fully visible and self-conscious. It registered largely as a kind of underlying presence, part of the very atmosphere which surrounded and suffused all aspects of experience. There were, however, clear symbols of its importance: the Bible treasured in nearly every home (including many where no other book was found); the meetinghouse strategically placed so as to dominate the entire village; the rhythm of life totally broken on Sundays for long hours of worship and meditation. Religion framed the essential standards of conduct, and served to “explain” every manner of event, large and small, happy and painful, public and private. Church and State were formally separate, but in practice they were everywhere intertwined.¹⁷ Church attendance (for everyone, including non-members) was required by law; “heretical” views were suppressed; and periodically the Court might declare “solemn days of humiliation by fasting, etc., and also for thanksgiving as occasion shall

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