

PORTRAIT OF A GREAT LAYMAN

Part I

A BIOGRAPHY OF WILLIAM BREWSTER

From Scrooby (1560) to Leyden (1619)

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Governor Bradford was a friend and colleague of William Brewster for more than thirty years and significant are his words which are recorded in his history: "I should say something of his life, if to say a little were but worse than to be silent. But I cannot wholly forbear, though haply more may be done hereafter."¹

It is this student's intention to collect and arrange a biographical sketch, though fragmented it will be, of whom I consider to be the most influential man among the Pilgrims, the one Elder, Mr. William Brewster. There has been only one such biography written in 1857, which is outdated, and it concentrates more on the time of the man than on the man himself.² I will be assuming that my readers are well acquainted with the history of the Pilgrim movement and will therefore concentrate my labor on composing a word picture of this great forefather and his contribution to Congregationalism and, indeed, to the Old and New World.

An English antiquarian, says of the Elder Brewster, and I most heartedly concur, that he "was the most eminent person in the movement, and who, if that honor is to be given

¹William Bradford, Bradford's History of Plymouth Plantation (Massachusetts Historical Society, 1856), p. 409.

²Rev. A.M. Ashbel Steele, The Life and Time of William Brewster (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott and Co., 1857). Certainly I am most indebted to Rev. Steele for his work and I only hope that I can but build on his contribution to our Pilgrim history. As Rev. Steele relied heavily upon the work of William Bradford as his main source, so will I rely heavily upon the same Bradford. I will also be quoting often from Rev. Steele as a secondary source once removed from Bradford's History.

to any single person, must be regarded as the Father of New England."³

1560
Scrooby

William Brewster, the founder of Plymouth Colony, was born in Scrooby, England.⁴ He was born about the year 1560,⁵ only a little more than a year after Elizabeth, the Queen of England, came to the throne. Young William grew up in comfort and plenty on the land of Scrooby Manor, which his father managed for the Archbishop of York. The lad must have had good educational training before he entered the university, for Bradford writes that he had the "knowledge of the Latin tongue and some insight into the Greek."⁶

Cambridge

Brewster entered the University of Cambridge. At this time there were fourteen colleges and Brewster studied at the oldest, Peterhouse. We do not know how long Brewster was a student there but we can assume that he took his first

³Rev. Joseph Hunter, Massachusetts Historical Collection, Four Series, Vol. I., p. 64-5. Hunter is a fellow of the Society of Antiquarians of London, and Company, and of the Massachusetts Historical Society. He is also an assistant keeper of Her Majesty's Records, author of collections concerning the founders of New Plymouth.

⁴Harry Skilton, "William Brewster," in The New International Dictionary of the Christian Church, gen. ed. by J.D. Douglas (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1974), p. 154.

⁵Robert M. Bartlett, The Faith of the Pilgrim (New York: United Church Press, 1978). Bartlett says Brewster was born about 1566.

⁶William Bradford, History of Plymouth Plantation Version by Samuel Eliot Morison, 1952, p. 409, 412.

degree. It was while in the university that he acquired his separatist ideology.⁷

Court

After the university, Brewster left for the Court, where he entered the official service of Mr. William Davidson, one of the Queen's ambassadors⁸ and later one of her principle secretaries of state. His service as a secretary and close friend to Mr. Davidson began either in the autumn of 1584, or early in the summer of 1585. Steele believes the former date of 1584.⁹ Brewster entered the stage of political life

1584

.....not when all around was as the calm unruffled sea, but when the broad surface of all Europe was as the heaving ocean; and ere long he must himself feel its surging billows, and upon his mind must have been the apprehensions, as well as effects of tyranny and religious intolerance now manifested in the Netherlands, and which called forth the sympathies of England, in view of the threatening contest.¹⁰

1586

In about 1586, when Brewster was age 26 and William Davidson was 48 years of age, the Queen dispatched Mr. Davidson to Holland. Here Brewster became a competent secretary to the ambassador. Bradford writes that "the secretary found him so discreet and faithful that he trusted him (Brewster) above all others that were about him. He only employed him in all matters of greatest trust and secrecy."¹¹

Holland

⁷Skilton, p. 154.

⁸Skilton. Davidson was an ambassador to Holland.

⁹Steele, p. 43.

¹⁰Steele, p. 50.

¹¹Bradford, p. 409-10.

1587 When Queen Elizabeth decided to execute Mary, Queen of Scots in 1587, Mr. Davidson was assigned to the legal process and eventually Elizabeth made him the scapegoat. Davidson was tried and committed to the Tower of London. Bradford writes that Brewster remained with Mr. Davidson some good time after he was put from his place, doing him many faithful offices of service in the time of his troubles."¹²

1590 After leaving Holland, Brewster went back to Scrooby about 1590. Mr. Davidson helped him to secure the court appointment as postmaster¹³ which was the position that his late father¹⁴ held at the ancient manor. So Brewster left the life of the court and the metropolis for duties in the country. Brewster, says Bartlett,

Scrooby
Manor

was the general host at Scrooby Manor, the village squire who was manager of the estate, bailiff, postmaster and magistrate.¹⁵ He was respected for his university training, knowledge of the world, ample income, and friendly nature. He provided bed, food, and drink for travelers, and feed and shelter for their animals. As postmaster he was required to keep ready for instant use three 'good and sufficient horses' with 'furniture fit and belonging,' such as saddles, bridles, dispatch bags, and three horns

¹²Bradford, p. 410.

¹³Gaius Glenn Atkins and Frederick L. Fagley, History of American Congregationalism (Boston and Chicago: The Pilgrim Press, 1942), p. 49.

¹⁴Atkins and Fagley, p. 49, footnote # 11. Old Brewster "must have died early in 1589."

¹⁵Ibid., p. 49. In 1590, Brewster must have been in good standing with the authorities.

'to blow by the way,' wayfarers usually arrived armed with pistol, sword, or dagger for defense against highwaymen. Weary guests enjoyed the welcome of Scrooby Manor--oak logs glowing in its huge fireplaces, a mug of hot toddy or buttered ale to flavor their roast beef and Yorkshire pudding.¹⁶

The Church of England had many problems, one of which she could not legislate for herself. The sovereign was by act and consent of Parliament, the not so clearly defined head of the church. Brewster decided to withdraw quietly and joined the Separatist Congregation of which the aged and pious and lately deprived Richard Clyfton was pastor.

1594 Brewster also married around 1594 to Mary of whom we know so very little.

Babworth Bartlett says that Brewster "on his home visits from the Queen's court had heard Richard Clyfton preach. He liked his ideas and often journeyed the seven miles from Scrooby (to Babworth) to hear him on Sundays, taking with him others who were dissatisfied with the state of the national church."¹⁷ Eventually Brewster would procure Clyfton as the pastor of the Scrooby church.

Gainsborough After Babworth, Brewster joined the separatist at Gainsborough. This particular congregation of which John Smith was pastor met for three or four years at Gainsborough but the distance was far for many and also dangerous for

¹⁶Bartlett, p. 66.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 68.

some because of having to be concealed. Bradford records,

These people became two distinct bodies or churches, and in regard to distance of place did congregate severally; for they were of sundry towns and villages, some in Nottinghamshire, some in Lincolnshire, and some of Yorkshire where they border nearest together.¹⁸

Perse-
cution

After some persecution, Brewster formed a separate church at Scrooby Manor with Richard Clyfton for pastor, John Robinson for teacher and himself as their elder. Brewster was certainly the executive leader at this time in the Scrooby church. Later, Brewster would become the official elder of the separatist in Leyden, Holland.¹⁹

Being the concerned layman Christian he was, Brewster lived, writes Bradford,

.....in good esteem among his friends, and the good gentlemen of those parts especially the godly and religious. He did much good in the country where he lived, in promoting and furthering religion; and not only by his practice and example, and provoking and encouraging of others, but by procuring of good preachers to all places thereabouts, and drawing on of others to assist and help forward in such a work; he himself most commonly deepest in the charge, and some times above his ability.²⁰

Brewster, procured for the ministry John Smith for the Gainsborough church and Richard Clyfton as rector of the Babworth church who later became pastor at Scrooby. This leadership is certainly a witness not only of his influence but of his good judgement and layman dedication.

¹⁸Bradford, p. 9.

¹⁹Atkins and Fagley, p. 49.

²⁰Bradford, p. 325, 326.

Brewster also procured John Robinson who recently was deprived of his ministry in Norwich. Most likely John and his wife, Bridget, and their children lived with Brewster at Scrooby for over a year. Brewster and Robinson both Cambridge men who both owned good libraries, spent much time together discussing theology and politics. This was a valuable friendship in formulating their separatist views.

1606 The uniting of these bodies, some from Babworth and Gainsborough into one church at Scrooby Manor took place about the year 1606 when Brewster was in about his forty-seventh year of age. Bradford writes that "after they were joined together in communion, he (Brewster) was a special stay and help to them. (They) ordinarily met at his house (Brewster's) on the Lord's day, which was a Manor of the Bishop's...and with great love he entertained them when they came, making provision for them to his great charge."²¹

While at Scrooby they made a, now famous, covenant.

William Bradford records:

covenant

So many, therefore, of these professors as saw the evil of those in these, and whose hearts the Lord had touched with heavenly zeal for His truth, they shook off this yoke of antichristian bondage, and as the Lord's free people joined themselves (by a covenant of the Lord) into a church estate, in the fellowship of the gospel, to walk in all His ways made known, or to be made known unto them, according to their best endeavors, whatsoever it should cost them, the Lord assisting them. And that it cost them something this ensuing history will declare.²²

²¹Bradford, p. 411-412.

²²Bradford, p. 9.

This same William Bradford was attracted to Brewster and joined them at Scrooby. Brewster also grew fond of young Bradford and became his foster father and tutored him in Hebrew, Greek, Latin, history, literature, the Bible and theology.

1607 The year 1607 brought good news in that Brewster's daughter, Fear, married; bad news in that persecution increased. But in God's providence, bad is often good. On March 1, 1607, Brewster resigned his postmastership because of the pressure exerted by the government authorities. In 1607, Brewster and other separatists were ordered to appear upon lawful summons at the Collegiate Church of Southwell but he refused to go. On September 15, and December 1, 1607, warrants for his arrest were given. Brewster described in these warrants as "very dangerous schismatical separatist, Brownist and irreligious subject"²³ a twenty pound fine was
 1608 imposed on him on April 22, 1608, for not appearing at Southwell. The affluent Brewster not only paid his fine but those of two other Scrooby citizen separatists. The total amount would in our day be about \$3,000.00. King James was now the monarch. His declaration concerning the Separatists said that he "will make them conform, or (he) will harry them out of the kingdom, or else do worse."²⁴

Prison Bradford records that some Separatists "were taken and clapt into prison, others had their houses beset, and watched

²³Bartlett, p. 71.

²⁴Bradford quoted in Bartlett, p. 142.

night and day, they barely escaping, while the most part were fain to fly and leave all--habitations, friends, and means of living."²⁵ Brewster sensed that they all might be thrown into the dungeon. John Penry, just before his execution, wrote a letter to the Separatists urging them to leave England. He writes:

And, my good brethren, seeing banishment, with loss of goods, is likely to betide you all, prepare yourselves for this hard entreaty, and rejoice that you are made worthy for Christ's cause to suffer and bear all things. And I beseech you that none of you, in this case, look upon his particular estate; but regard the general state of the church of God, that the same may go, and be kept together, whithersoever it shall please God to send you. Let not those of you, that either have stocks in your hands, or some likely trades to live by, dispose of yourselves where it may be most commodious for your outward estate, and, in the mean time, suffer the poor ones, that have no such means, either to bear the whole work upon their weak shoulders, or to end their days in sorrow and mourning, for want of outward and inward comforts, in the land of strangers. But consult with the whole church, yea, with the brethren of other places, how the church may be kept together and built, whithersoever they go... Yea, I wish you and them to be together if you may, whithersoever you shall be banished, and to this purpose, to bethink you beforehand where to be; yea, to send some who may be meet to prepare you some resting-place. And, be all of you assured, that He who is your God in England, will be your God in any land under the whole heaven.²⁶

The Scrooby congregation now proposed to go to Holland. William Brewster had been there before and it probably seemed to him to be the best place for a free exercise of their faith.

²⁵Bradford, p. 12.

²⁶Bartlett, p. 72, 73.

The English authorities did not want the Separatists to leave. The ports and harbors were shut against them. "The mariners whom they paid to take them, charged them exorbitantly and betrayed them to searchers and officers, who plundered them to their shirts. They (some) were imprisoned in Old Boston, families were separated, woman left behind without a cloth to shift them."²⁷ Brewster was one of them who was imprisoned. Others were in trouble with a storm at sea trying to escape. They eventually reached Holland. Finally all of the Separatists arrived in Amsterdam in the summer of 1608. Brewster and Robinson were "the last to come over, having farried longest in Englend, to help the weakest over before them."²⁸

Sea
Storm

1608

Amster-
dam

Now in Amsterdam, they formed, with another congregation (which came earlier,) a united church. This church was not to be united for very long. Problems over such things as the mode of baptism to the mode of dress surfaced, not to be resolved. They had hardly been in Amsterdam a year until the leadership was seeking a new city.

1609
Leyden

In the summer or 1609, the emigrant company or should we say, Pilgrims, came to the city of Leyden, Holland. It was probably upon Brewster's advice that they ventured there because he had lived for a short duration of time in Leyden as Davidson's secretary some 23 years earlier. We can safely assume that both Brewster and Robinson were attracted to Leyden because of its great university. Brewster also

²⁷Atkins and Fagley, p. 52.

²⁸Bradford, p. 16.

had connections there due to his Cambridge school years.

University
of Leyden

While in Leyden, William Brewster taught English and Latin to the continental students at the university. Bradford records that "many gentlemen, both Danes and Germans resorted to him some of them being great men's sons."²⁹

Pilgrim
Press

Besides Brewster's great talent as a university teacher, he set up a printing house in Choir Alley. Brewster's purpose was to publish books which were forbidden in his mother country and which would promote the reformation there. Young Edward Winslow served Brewster as his editor and Robinson as his consultant. Soon the printing press was in trouble. Attempts were made to suppress their Puritan and Separatist theology and polity. In 1619, Brewster's press published Perth Assembly. This publication landed Brewster in the university's prison along with his press. While in prison, Brewster must have given great thought to where on earth he could exercise his faith in intellectual and political freedom. Concerning that place and that freedom, would be the remaining saga of Part II of the life of Elder William Brewster.

1619
Perth
Assembly

²⁹Bradford, p. 326.

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