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History Of Plymouth Plantation By William Bradford

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Introduction: A Cornerstone of Early American History

When we think of the founding of America, images of the Mayflower, a harsh winter, and the first Thanksgiving often come to mind. Yet the most authoritative and vivid account of these events comes not from a modern textbook, but from the pen of a man who lived through them: William Bradford. His work, *Of Plymouth Plantation* (often referred to as **History Of Plymouth Plantation By William Bradford**), stands as a timeless chronicle of courage, faith, and resilience. Written between 1630 and 1651, this manuscript is more than a historical record—it is a literary masterpiece that captures the spirit of the Pilgrims and the birth of a new society. In this article, we will explore the background of the author, the content and themes of the work, its historical significance, and why it remains essential reading for anyone interested in early American history.

Who Was William Bradford?

William Bradford was born in 1590 in Austerfield, Yorkshire, England. Orphaned at a young age, he found solace in the Bible and became a devoted member of a Separatist congregation. These Puritans believed the Church of England was beyond reform and sought to worship independently. Facing persecution, the group fled to Leiden, Holland, in 1608, where Bradford learned the trade of a weaver. By 1620, having endured economic hardship and cultural pressures, the congregation decided to establish a colony in the New World. Bradford sailed on the Mayflower and, after the death of John Carver, became the second Governor of Plymouth Colony—a position he held for most of his life.

Bradford's leadership was pivotal during the colony's early, desperate years. He was not only a governor but also a historian. Beginning in 1630, he set down the story of the Pilgrims from their origins in England through the first decades in America, creating what we now know as **History Of Plymouth Plantation By William Bradford**. His writing reflects a man of deep faith, keen observation, and profound humility.

The Manuscript: Discovery and Publication

Bradford's manuscript was not widely known during his lifetime. After his death in 1657, it passed to his son, then to his grandson. For a time, it was housed in the Old South Meeting House in Boston. During the American Revolution, the manuscript was reportedly used as a ledger by a British soldier—a remarkable survival story in itself. Later, it was discovered in the library of the Bishop of London in 1855 and finally returned to the United States. The first full publication of the work appeared in 1856, and it has since become a foundational text of American history. The modern title, *Of Plymouth Plantation*, was assigned by editors; Bradford himself simply called it his "history." The manuscript is now housed at the Massachusetts State Library in Boston.

Content Overview: A Journey of Faith and Struggle

The narrative of **History Of Plymouth Plantation By William Bradford** is divided into two major sections. The first part (written later, around 1646) describes the Pilgrims' religious persecution in England, their time in Holland, and the decision to sail to America. The second part (written from 1630 to 1646) provides a year-by-year account of the colony from 1620 to 1646. Bradford's prose is straightforward yet powerful, blending personal observation with a sense of divine purpose.

The Voyage of the Mayflower

Bradford's description of the 1620 crossing is harrowing. The ship was overcrowded, storms battered the vessel, and many passengers fell ill. Yet Bradford highlights the faith that sustained them. He writes of the "many difficulties and troubles" but also of the "smiles of God" that preserved them. When land was finally sighted at Cape Cod, the Pilgrims knelt in prayer. Bradford's account of the Mayflower Compact—a document formed to establish civil order—reveals his belief in self-governance and the rule of law.

The First Winter and the "Starving Time"

No part of Bradford's history is more poignant than the description of the first winter. Half of the settlers died from disease, scurvy, and exposure. Bradford himself lost his wife, Dorothy, who drowned off the ship's side in Provincetown Harbor. He records that at one point only six or seven people were strong enough to care for the sick. Yet he never succumbs to despair; instead, he sees this suffering as a test of faith. His narrative underscores the human cost of colonization—a cost that modern readers must acknowledge with both sorrow and respect.

Relations with Native Americans

Bradford's account of interactions with Indigenous peoples is complex. He describes the arrival of Samoset and Squanto, who taught the Pilgrims how to plant corn, fish, and survive. He records the peace treaty with Massasoit, leader of the Wampanoag, which lasted for decades. However, Bradford also documents conflicts, such as the Pequot War (1636–1638), which he justifies as God's judgment. His perspective is unapologetically Eurocentric, but his narrative remains a primary source for understanding early colonial relationships. Modern historians caution readers to approach these passages critically, while acknowledging Bradford's effort to record events as he saw them.

The Growth of the Colony

As the years pass, Bradford chronicles the colony's economic progress, the establishment of private property, and the challenges of communal living. He was a keen observer of human nature, noting that the "common course" of sharing all goods led to complaints and laziness. The shift to private land ownership (the "distribution of land") is described as a turning point that encouraged industry. He also tells of the arrival of new settlers, the construction of meetinghouses, and the gradual expansion of the settlement. Through it all, Bradford's hand as governor is evident, and his narrative offers insights into early American governance and social experiment.

Major Themes in Bradford's History

The **History Of Plymouth Plantation By William Bradford** is rich with themes that resonate with students of history and literature alike.

Divine Providence

Bradford writes with an unwavering belief that God is guiding the Pilgrims' journey. He frequently attributes survival to divine intervention—a storm that calms, a Native American who speaks English, a plague that thins enemy ranks. This theme of Providence is central to the Puritan worldview and shapes the entire narrative. For Bradford, history is not random; it is a unfolding story of God's will.

The Importance of Community and Covenant

From the Mayflower Compact to the church covenants, Bradford emphasizes that the success of Plymouth depended on mutual agreement and shared responsibility. He laments divisions and schisms, such as those caused by Thomas Morton's Merrymount colony, which he portrays as a threat to moral order. The community's strength, in his view, lay in its commitment to God and to one another.

Trials and Perseverance

Bradford does not flinch from recording suffering. He details starvation, disease, financial debt, and even a lightning strike that killed a young boy. Yet he always brings the reader back to the Pilgrims' resilience. This theme of steadfastness against overwhelming odds is one reason the book has inspired generations of readers. It is a testament to human endurance and the power of faith.

Literary and Historical Significance

Bradford's manuscript is valuable on multiple levels. As literature, it is one of the earliest examples of American prose, written in a style that is both plain and eloquent. Unlike the ornate language of many contemporaries, Bradford's sentences are direct, drawing on the cadences of the King James Bible. His use of the "plain style" aligns with Puritan aesthetics—language meant to instruct and inspire, not to impress.

Historically, **History Of Plymouth Plantation By William Bradford** is indispensable. It is the only detailed account of the first three decades of Plymouth Colony written by a participant. It corrects later romanticized versions and offers a window into the daily struggles and successes of early settlers. The work also provides context for understanding later American ideals: self-government, religious freedom (within limits), hard work, and community cooperation.

Influence on American Identity

Bradford's narrative helped shape the national myth of the Pilgrims as pious founders. The "Pilgrims" (a term Bradford used sparingly) became symbols of perseverance and piety, especially in the 19th century. Thanksgiving, as national holiday, draws on Bradford's description of the 1621 harvest feast. The book has been cited by presidents, taught in schools, and adapted into popular culture. While scholars now critique its omissions and biases, its core message of hope remains powerful.

Criticisms and Modern Perspectives

No work is perfect. Critics point out that Bradford's view of Native Americans is limited and often hostile. He praises Squanto but also describes the Pequot War in terms that sanitize violence. His history also largely ignores women: only a few appear by name, and their contributions are downplayed. Furthermore, Bradford's religious framework can blur factual accuracy. Yet these limitations are also what make the text a primary source—it reveals the mindset of a 17th-century Puritan leader. Modern readers should approach it with context, comparing it with other sources such as Native American oral histories and archaeological evidence.

Conclusion: The Enduring Legacy of Bradford's Chronicle

Nearly four centuries after William Bradford set down his pen, the **History Of Plymouth Plantation By William Bradford** continues to captivate and inform. It is a story of ordinary people driven by extraordinary belief, of trial and triumph, and of the fragile beginnings of a nation. Whether studied in a classroom or read for personal enrichment, this text offers a profound lesson in the human spirit. Bradford ended his history with a simple prayer: "That God would blesse and keepe them." His work ensures that the Pilgrims' journey is never forgotten, and that their history remains a vital part of America's story.

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