**William Bradford (1590-1657)**


Born in 1590 in Yorkshire, England, William Bradford was orphaned at a young age and reared by his grandparents and uncles to be a farmer. Bradford broke with his family in early adolescence, affiliating himself with the [Separatist Puritans](https://www.learner.org/series/amerpass/unit03/glossary.html#nonseparating) and thereby making a religious commitment that would profoundly influence the course of his life. The Separatists dreamed of creating a purified religious community, free of the hierarchies and worldly rituals that they felt contaminated the Church of England. The sect was known as "Separatist" because, unlike most Puritan congregations, it rejected the Church of England entirely instead of attempting to reform it from within. Bradford and his fellow Separatists paid a high price for their controversial beliefs: religious persecution led them to flee England for safer harbors in Holland and eventually in America.

In 1620, Bradford and part of the congregation to which he belonged set sail for America on the *Mayflower*, bringing with them a patent granting them land in the territory of Virginia, where they hoped to set up their ideal church. Bad weather pushed them off course, and they landed well north of Virginia on the coast of what is now Plymouth, Massachusetts. There they began the difficult work of establishing a community in unfamiliar, and sometimes hostile, territory. Bradford was elected governor in 1621 and occupied that office, with only brief intermissions, until his death in 1657. In 1630 he began writing *Of Plymouth Plantation*, the history of his "Pilgrims'" religious and civil settlement in the New World.

Bradford's literary reputation depends, as scholar David Levin puts it, "as much on the quality of his historical intelligence as on the virtues of his style." Indeed, Bradford's text has long been celebrated for the "plain style" he endorses in its first paragraph. His simple yet artful prose, characterized by finely tuned sentences based upon the language and cadences of the Geneva Bible, is often regarded as a model of a specifically American style of writing. But, as Levin points out, Bradford's text is no less notable for its historiographic project, a complex balance of religious exhortation and unvarnished reportage.

Clearly, *Of Plymouth Plantation* is meant to serve as an account of God's design in planting the Plymouth colony, interpreting events that might seem random or even commonplace to modern readers as evidence of God's hand at work on earth. Bradford's history extols the purity and strength of the first settlers in order to inspire subsequent generations to greater sanctity, combating what he perceived to be the spiritual decline of the community in the years following the initial settlement. While Bradford's desire to read God's will in the history of Plymouth colors his text — and frequently skews his understanding of non-Puritan people — his tendency toward exhortation is often balanced by an unflinching commitment to historical accuracy. He is surprisingly blunt in relating some of the troubles that plagued the Plymouth community, from rancorous differences between leaders to upsetting cases of infidelity among congregants. The result is a complicated, engaging document that has become an integral part of the mythology concerning the foundation of America.