

They knew they were pilgrims. Plymouth colony and the contest for American liberty. By John G. Turner. Pp. xii + 447 incl. 25 ills and 3 maps. New Haven–London: Yale University Press, 2020. £22.50. 978 0 300 22550 1
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Plymouth, the New England colony that would provide Americans with their ‘thanksgiving’ holiday, acquired near-mythological significance in the nineteenth century. In a typical assertion of its importance, the historian George Bancroft credited the colony with ensuring that ‘Democratic liberty and independent Christian worship . . . existed in America’. Bombast of this kind rested on slender foundations. On the other hand, William Bradford’s ‘Of Plimoth Plantation’, a history-cum-annals of the Separatist community written by an insider who arrived on the *Mayflower* in 1620, retains much of its power as a narrative of suffering, survival and adaptation. In the twentieth century few academic historians have revisited the political, social and religious history of the colony, a void that John Turner has filled with a skilfully written, archive-based history that extends from start (1620) to finish (1691), when the government of William III incorporated it into Massachusetts.

In Turner’s telling, the story moves swiftly from the stirrings of religious dissent in 1590s Nottinghamshire, the forming of two covenanted fellowships in 1606, the decision of two ministers in the Church of England, John Robinson and John Smythe, to turn Separatist and leave the state Church, the migration of both congregations to the Netherlands and, a decade later, the resolve of the Leiden-based congregation led by Robinson to find a new home on the other side of the Atlantic. A hard bargain was struck with English merchants who chartered a ship and filled it with supplies. After reaching Cape Cod in late November, the community fixed on a site to the north of the Cape that John Smith had already named Plymouth. Once past the horrors of the first winter and spring, when half the colonists died, those who survived and others who joined them became remarkably adept as traders who gathered furs from Native Americans in the region to the north-east known as Kennebec; Plymouth men also established a trading post in the Connecticut River valley, only to be overtaken in the mid-1630s by adventurers from Massachusetts and elsewhere. Dwarfed in size, wealth and much else by that colony, Plymouth became something of a backwater, unable to attract any of the high-powered ministers who were pouring into Massachusetts, nor strong enough to exclude Baptists and other ‘sectaries’ from settling in the region. Nor did Plymouth secure a charter of the kind that protected the sovereignty of Rhode Island (1644), Connecticut (1665) and Massachusetts (1629).

There is much to admire in Turner’s lucid telling of the tale. Inevitably, he must respond to several of the myths that envelop these ‘pilgrims’ (a name the community acquired in the nineteenth century): the nature of the ‘first Thanksgiving’; the meaning and significance of the ‘Mayflower Compact’; the treatment of Native Americans; the government’s response to religious dissent (often described as one of toleration, in contrast to the policy in Massachusetts); and the role of these Separatists in the making of the ‘Congregational Way’ associated with non-Separatists such as John Cotton, Thomas Hooker, Thomas Weld and others in Massachusetts and England. On all of these, with one possible exception, Turner is persuasive. As others before him have recognised and he reiterates, the first

'Thanksgiving' was not a religious ceremony but akin to a harvest feast. What was eaten that day remains uncertain; what is certain is that a substantial group of Native Americans attended. The Mayflower Compact was designed to shore up the shaky authority of the colony's leaders in response to 'mutinous' speeches among some of the passengers on the *Mayflower*. Structural weaknesses of various kinds, one of them a near-total absence of ordained clergy, meant that Baptists and other strays could practise their faith even as others in the colony made do without the sacraments. But the response to Quakers was different, and by the 1670s the colony was hardening its posture toward Dissent.

When it comes to Native Americans, Turner chooses a more moderate path than the one laid out by David J. Silverman in *This land is their land: the Wampanoag Indians, Plymouth colony, and the troubled history of Thanksgiving* (London 2019). Silverman details a long list of incidents of aggression that preceded the coming of the 'pilgrims', incidents that explain the wariness of the Wampanoags and certain acts of aggression on their part during the earliest moments of encounter. Yet both historians acknowledge the treaty subscribed in 1621 by the colonists and the Wampanoag leader Massasoit (or Ousaquin), a treaty beneficial to local Wampanoag who were threatened by a much more powerful neighbour, the Narragansett. Although Silverman sees events through the eyes of the Native Americans, the two more or less agree on the sources of the war that broke out in 1675; in Turner's words, the Plymouth government wanted to impose 'humiliating terms' on Metacom (or Philip), the current leader of the Wampanoags, who, like most of the people in his jurisdiction, had never converted. Without dwelling on the matter, Turner indicates that ministers and lay people in Plymouth did little to evangelise the Indians around them.

My one quibble is with Turner's handling of the origins of New England-style Congregationalism. He reiterates the 'Deacon Fuller myth' (as it was named by its modern critics), the story that visitors from Plymouth influenced the forming of a congregation in Salem, where the earliest wave of colonists sponsored by the Massachusetts-Bay Company settled in 1628. Separatism thus becomes a key link in the chain of events leading to the decision (by 1634) of the newcomers to Massachusetts to follow suit. This story overlooks the simultaneous emergence of covenanted, congregational-style communities in the Netherlands (organised by people who knew nothing of Plymouth), the explosion of such communities in 1640s England (again by people wholly ignorant of Plymouth) and, more tellingly, the significantly 'congregational' elements of radical Puritan reflection on church government dating from the 1570s and 1580s and especially by Henry Jacob in the first decade of the seventeenth century, reflection evoked by John Cotton and others in New England when English moderates painted them as closet Separatists. Bypassing, as he does, this complex history, Turner comes close to sanctioning an 'origins' story that ill-informed Congregationalists in the United States continue to evoke.

As his organising theme, Turner has fixed on 'liberty', a word that has a prominent place in the title of his book. But, as he is careful to note, the founders of Plymouth used this word in a Pauline-Puritan manner: it was 'Christian liberty' they were seeking, the liberty to free themselves from a state Church burdened with relics of Catholicism. For Bradford, the relevant text (apart from Scripture)

was John Foxe's *Book of Martyrs*. Evoking it in the opening pages of his history of the colony, he tied the emergence of Separatism to the ever-ongoing struggle between the AntiChrist and those who, like the Separatists, were the suffering servants of Christ. Turner does not call attention to this passage. Nor does he mention Bradford's subsequent attempts (probably dating from the late 1640s) to remind the 'young men' of Plymouth what it had meant to be a Separatist in pre-1620 England and the Netherlands. Here, a beat has been missed, the irrelevance of the Separatist posture on the other side of the Atlantic and 'Christian liberty' overtaken by a more secular understanding tied to equity and something akin to popular sovereignty, an understanding embodied in the colony's earliest formal law code and its rules about voting, the distribution of land and the like that date from the mid-1630s.

It is quite unlikely that, in this four-hundredth anniversary year of the arrival of the *Mayflower*, the current president of the United States will visit Plymouth, though vice-president Calvin Coolidge did so in 1920, when he witnessed an elaborate pageant. What Plymouth signifies at the present moment has fallen victim to a broader confusion about the Puritans as exemplars of anything good. Fortunately, Turner has written a book that will survive this confusion. His is as good an overview as we are likely to have, far superior to any of its predecessors and, I suspect, better than any others likely to be published in this anniversary season.

HARVARD DIVINITY SCHOOL

DAVID D. HALL

The call to happiness. Eudaimonism in English Puritan thought. Pp. xii + 255. By Nathaniel A. Warne. New York-London: Lexington Books/Fortress Academic, 2019. £65. 978 1 9787 0024 6

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The quest for human happiness is perpetual. 'Happiness' can mean many things, especially in contemporary culture. Warne has written an important book about what happiness meant in the thought of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Puritans.

This may strike some as odd since caricatures of Puritanism abound, fuelled by the 1925 comment by American journalist, H. L. Mencken, whose definition of Puritanism was 'the haunting fear that someone, somewhere, may be happy' (p. 1). Yet 'Christian eudaimonism' (happiness) was an important strand of living for Puritans. Warne explores eudaimonism as it existed for Puritans as a vital tradition of Protestant Christianity. He especially wants to show that Christian vocation or the 'divine calling' of the Christian was 'an aspect of human flourishing, illuminated from within this tradition of Christian eudaimonism' (p. 1). His purpose is to show that 'eudaimonism in the Puritans makes a distinctive contribution from the history of ideas, bringing a typically naturalist emphasis on flourishing and universality, with more Protestant and ecclesial concerns of individual calling' (p. 2). Most broadly, the author hopes that 'the tradition from which this book draws can create new beginnings out of old models of Protestant ethics' (p. 2).