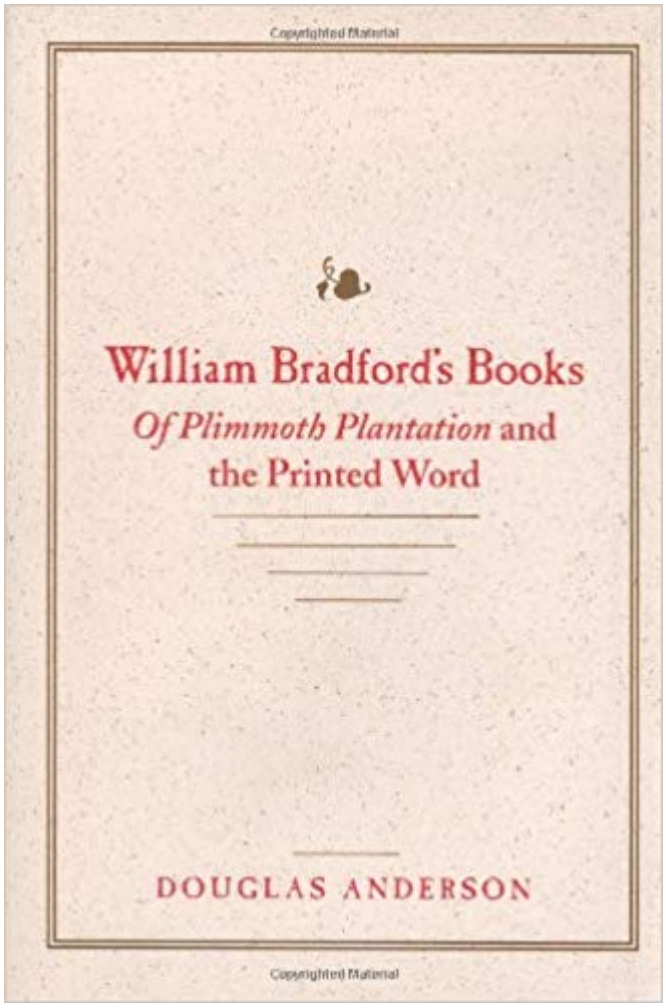
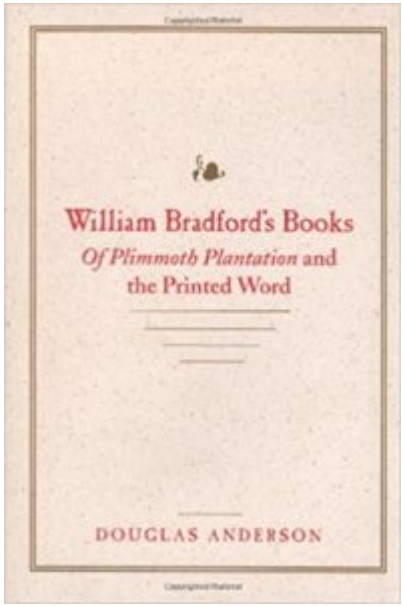
Re-reading William Bradford





William Bradford’s Books: Of Plimmoth Plantation and the Printed Word

Early American texts that become “classics” and make their way into our classrooms often serve to illustrate a thesis. Such was once the fate of William Bradford’s *Of Plymouth Plantation*. In my debut as a teacher at Yale in the early 1960s, I was entrusted with a section of a junior-year introduction to American studies. All sections of this course had to read the same ten books, one of them Bradford’s history. It being chronologically the earliest, I gave it the same priority in my syllabus, a move justified by the paradigmatic situation the book described, the loss of community. My interpretive eye fixed on those passages in which Bradford laments the weakening of the “bonds of love” as the economy shifted to cattle raising and the colonists moved out from Plymouth to be closer to their farms. As Thomas Bender noted in *Community and Social Change in America* (New Brunswick, N.J., 1978), the decline of community, with its Tocquevilleian overtones of incipient individualism (*Democracy in America* was, not surprisingly, another of the mandated texts), had become a major theme of sociological and historical work in the postwar years, a framework so capacious and flexible—or perhaps utterly without critical definition—that its pertinence to several different periods of transition was taken for granted. For a course that was designed to demonstrate the organic continuities of American culture, Bradford’s history seemed an ideal witness to these continuities as they extended into the postwar years.

But what if *Of Plymouth Plantation* were approached as literature and not as social history? In the early 1970s the enthusiastic makers of “early American literature,” dissenters all from the proposition that “the plain style” sufficed as a description of Puritan aesthetics, offered a new reading of Bradford’s text as typological and therefore prophetic or eschatological. Or, attentive to Bradford’s evocations of God’s “providence,” they argued that instead of being a tale of the “decline of community” the book is marked by a refusal to fix the meaning of providence. Others pointed to the influence on Bradford of his literary models, including Eusebius and John Foxe.

A complicating circumstance in any appraisal of Bradford’s history is that most of us make do with versions of the text that differ from the seventeenth-century original. The principal villain of this story is Samuel Eliot Morison, who in 1952 re-edited the text from manuscript, but to make it more readable moved to appendices the substantial archive of letters and other documents that Bradford himself had included in his narrative. Another challenge for any editor is what to do with the interpolations Bradford made in the mid-1640s as he reviewed the first part of his manuscript (written c. 1630/31), interpolations Morison consigned to footnotes and appendices or ignored.

Out of such difficulties is good revisionism born. Douglas Anderson, a literary historian who has previously written on Franklin and domesticity, has employed three strategies in this sharply revisionist book. First, he has studied the original manuscript for evidence of Bradford’s intentions and practice as an author. The materiality of the manuscript, but especially the interpolations, looms large in Anderson’s analysis. Second, he has heeded the entire archive of documents in the manuscript (but not in Morison or any other recent edition)

and has paid careful attention to other contemporary texts, like *Mourts Relation* (1622) and Edward Winslow's *Good Newes* (1624). Third, he has read the handful of books that Bradford cited in *Of Plymouth Plantation*. To these he adds books that were either owned by or available to Bradford (e.g., in William Brewster's personal library).

To materiality Anderson therefore joins intertextuality: every page of his analysis is marked by an acute sense of how Bradford as reader and writer draws on and responds to an extensive archive of printed books and manuscripts. This strategy drives two arguments that pervade *William Bradford's Book*. First, Bradford the writer is Bradford the artist who has intentionally cited other authors, introduced retrospective comments, and (above all) juxtaposed certain documents in order to give his work a distinctive "complexity." To what end, other than the pleasures of writing? For Anderson the answer to this question lies in Bradford's "profound conviction of the ubiquity of human error." No apocalyptic millenarian or lamenter of decline he; rather, Bradford practiced a "deliberate disengagement from the highly charged religious contests of his time," exhibiting a "forbearance" (163) in situations where others in England or New England acted more like the Puritans we love to scorn. Some of the qualities Anderson detects in the man and his narrative are more subtle, like his "preoccupation with the recognition and the containment of human difference" (71). But the basic thesis is straightforward, that Bradford affirmed the limitations of human nature and urged caution on those around him who pursued rigorous or inflexible solutions to moral and political problems.

"Complexity" thus carries a double meaning: literary structure mirrors ethical practice, the key to their interconnection being how Bradford as reader/writer comments in his "carefully interwoven" pages (107) on his own text as well as on those written by others. Two examples of this analysis must suffice. First, when Plymouth was consulted about the proper punishment for a sexual crime, the three ministers in the colony each offered advice in letters that Bradford incorporated into the history. The longest of these letters by far, from Charles Chauncy, was also the most stringent in urging death as a legitimate penalty. Anderson argues that Bradford regarded Chauncy as too extreme, which is why he incorporated a text of such length. Second, the encomium to William Brewster, a moderate leader if ever there were one, is placed out of chronological sequence, juxtaposed with certain contemporary events in order to indicate Bradford's uneasiness with them. The argument hinges on redating when Brewster died; if the date Bradford himself gives for Brewster's passing is correct, then the encomium occurs *not* out of sequence.

How plausible is Anderson's analysis? I am reminded as I ask this question of one of the late David Levin's foibles, his insistence that Cotton Mather's *Magnalia Christi Americana* was a unified work of art when all the evidence of composition suggested otherwise. Common sense might suggest that Bradford included Chauncy's letter for other reasons, one being that he was the most impressive minister in an underministered colony. I am uneasy about another of Anderson's assumptions, that he can recreate Bradford's manner of

reading certain texts. What we have is *Anderson's*reading in the service of an overall interpretation. Though I cannot share his confidence about Bradford's intentionality as writer or reader, this book provides a model of close reading based on strategies that few if any early Americanists have employed.

Further Reading:

See Maurice Stein, *The Eclipse of Community: An Interpretation of American Studies* (New York, 1964); Jesper Rosenmeier, "'With My Owne Eyes': William Bradford's *Of Plymouth Plantation*," in *Typology and Early American Literature*, ed. Sacvan Bercovitch (Amherst, Mass., 1972): 69-105; and Edward G. Gallagher and Thomas Werge, *Early Puritan Writers: A Reference Guide: William Bradford, John Cotton, Thomas Hooker, Edward Johnson, Richard Mather, Thomas Shepard* (Boston, Mass., 1976).

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