

I.. WILLIAM BREWSTER, PIONEER

Language is a strange business. Did you know that the words pawn and pioneer come from the same source? Both are derived from the French term for a foot soldier. Now, of course, pawns and pioneers do have something in common. Both are out there in front. But what different shades of meaning attach to these words when we consider why they are out there! A pawn is somebody else's tool, someone who is pushed around. A pioneer breaks new ground on his own initiative.

Today I want to tell you about a pioneer. He was one of the first American Christians and one of the first American Congregationalists in point of time. He is still one of the first in point of the contribution he made to us. His name was William Brewster, one of the Pilgrim Fathers.

We might take our first look at him on a hard, winter day, early in the year 1621. Three months ago he and a hundred other people stepped off the Mayflower and celebrated their safe arrival in the new world. Today half those people lie buried in a nearby hillside. Their graves are unmarked. Otherwise, the unknown Indians ashore might figure out how few remain alive to defend the ship. Of the fifty or so who remain, only seven are on their feet. The rest are down with scurvy. Among the seven who are standing is this man who performs the offices of nurse and nurse's aid. He is the second oldest person taking part in this harrowing enterprise, a man in his mid-fifties - quite an advanced age for these times. He is a man who recently left a comfortable home in Holland and before that an even more comfortable home in England. You wonder why a man like this would want to take a trip like this.

But then William Brewster always was an adventurer.

You might not have expected that from his beginnings. He grew up securely in a little English village with the unpropitious name of Scrooby. But there were two fairly notable features to that village and both were bound up with the destiny of the Brewster family. One feature was a large, decaying manor house. This house like all the property thereabouts was owned by the Archbishop of York. As "Bailiff and receiver" for the Archbishop, William Brewster's father collected rents from his neighbors, served as a justice of the peace and generally ran the community in his employer's interests. For this service he had the use of the manor and its land and was paid a modest salary.

The other significant feature on the landscape was The Great North Road. This was the main highway between the two British capitals of London and Edinburgh. Scrooby manor was located just about halfway between the two. The manor's strategic location led to the elder Brewster being commissioned by the Queen as Master of the Post. This meant that he was to keep "three good and sufficient horses" ready at all times for the Queen's couriers and to provide them with bed and board. For this office he also received a salary and was free to keep any profits he made from his tavern.

Put it all together and it was not a bad living. It was also a very "Establishment"-centered way of life. The Brewsters were the humble servants both of church and state.

But if that Great North Road was a source of security to a young boy, it may have proved a stimulant to restlessness as well. A road leads places, and when you grow up on a main road, you begin to wonder where it goes. Moreover, a highway like that was not only a channel of commerce; it was an artery of ideas. It was the main link between the "meane town-let" of Scrooby and what was happening in the world beyond. As he listened to his father ply the Queen's messengers for the latest news of court, as he took off his hat to the passing nobleman, as he eavesdropped on travelers passing judgment on the day's events over a tankard of hearty ale, as he grew there by the highway, William Brewster's mind reached out to horizons wider than those observable from a hamlet in the fens. He learned that these were times of tumult and discovery, of political upheaval and spiritual awakening. They were times for pioneers.

New horizons began to form for William Brewster in 1580. It was that year that he enrolled at Peterhouse College in the University of Cambridge. Governor William Bradford, who wrote the story of "Plimouth Plantation" tells us that it was at Cambridge that Brewster was "first seasoned with the seeds of grace and virtue." Translated into modern idiom that means that he met some groovy cats and began to see the light. Cambridge was a hotbed of church reform, a center for that group whom their enemies nicknamed The Puritans. They were mostly earnest young people who wanted to strip the church of what they felt was its unscriptural pomp and society of its crass materialism. In doctrine and in lifestyle they took their cue from Calvin and Bucer and other heroes of church reform on the continent.

But Brewster's Cambridge career was cut short by the kind of opportunity an adventurous young man could hardly turn down. In the words of Bradford, William Brewster "went to the courte, and served that religious godly gentleman, Mr. Davison." This was William Davison, Queen Elizabeth's Secretary of State. We hardly picture the Pilgrim Fathers as James Bond types. But in Holland and elsewhere, Brewster was sent on a variety of secret missions. Once he slept with the Keys of the City of Flushing under his pillow. They were security for a loan the English made to the Dutch for the purpose of driving the Spanish out of the Netherlands.

The promise of a diplomatic career was blasted when Davison was made scapegoat for the execution of Mary Queen of Scots and imprisoned in the Tower of London. But Brewster attended his master as faithfully in that place as he had in more advantageous surroundings.

Still his courtly prospects were at an end. In 1589 he returned to Scrooby and in time succeeded to his father's position. He married, settled down and became the father of a brood of little Puritans with such names as Wrestling, Love and Fear. He entered into his early thirties, that ultra-conservative time of life when the waistline widens, brain atrophies, the blood runs thin and status and security become the supreme values. William Brewster might have gone on for the rest of his days looking after the Archbishop's estates and equipping the court messengers.

But when a man turns forty he often passes through a kind of second birth. Then he may do some rather surprising things. What William Brewster did was to go to church in the nearby town of Gainsborough. This was highly irregular since there was St. Wilfred's right there in Scrooby, and it was fitting that a man in Brewster's position support the local parish. Even more irregular was the fact that this gathering in Gainsborough was not a proper church at all, but rather a "separatist conventicle." It was an underground church in a much truer sense than those groups given that title in recent years. For there was a law in England

that decreed that all religious services must be held under the auspices of the state church by state approved priests according to the state approved prayerbook. In joining a church like that in Gainsborough Brewster moved beyond the position of the Puritans proper, which was that of a reform body within the established Church of England. He threw in his lot with the radicals who moved outside.

Before long, about 1606 to be exact, some of the Gainsborough congregation formed a new congregation in Scrooby. William Brewster offered his tavern as a meeting place and frequently dined and boarded the worshipers at his own expense.

One can hardly blame the Archbishop of York for becoming a trifle annoyed at hearing his own manor house was being used in this way. By 1607 a warrant had gone out for the arrest of

"A very dangerous, schismatical, separatist, Brownist and irreligious subject by the name of William Brewster."

Well, we all know how these prospective Pilgrims were "harried out of the land" by the British authorities. Brewster himself was one of the last to leave. He remained behind as long as he could to see that all the others were safely landed in Holland. When at last he settled with his friends in Leiden, he was a poor man. He had spent most of his wealth helping others escape, and he was poorly equipped to earn a living at any of the trades open to an ex-patriate Englishman in a foreign city. Yet in time he found a way to put his gentleman's education to use. Leiden was a university town, and there were many students there who wanted to learn English. Brewster prepared an English grammar and managed to earn a comfortable living for his large family by teaching English to rich men's sons.

But once again Brewster was not content to be comfortable. Having helped to organize an underground church, he now joined with another Pilgrim Father to form an underground press. They began printing certain subversive religious literature and had it smuggled into Great Britain. King James was so enraged that he prevailed on the Dutch authorities to try to arrest Brewster. But the man from Scrooby was as foxy as he was daring. While they beat the bushes for him in Holland, he sneaked back to England.

In time that storm blew over and the English exiles entered into a more conciliatory relationship with church and state back home. An opportunity arose for another great adventure, a chance to try the experiment of living out their ideals of Christian community in the new world. William Brewster was one of those who negotiated with a group of British businessmen, "the Merchants Adventurers", for the financing of a new colony. Brewster and Bradford stated their case well:

"We believe the Lord is with us, they declared, we are well weaned from the delicate milk of our mother country....Our people are industrious and frugal....We are knit as a body in a most strict and sacred bond and covenant of the Lord... and mutually tied to all care for each others' good, and of the whole by every one.... Lastly, it is not with us, as with other men, whom small things can discourage, or small disappointments cause them to wish themselves home again."

To the Merchants Adventurers that sounded like a good deal.

When William Brewster got off the Mayflower, a man in his mid-fifties unused to manual labor, he faced the hardest challenge of all. Yet, as we saw, at the lowest point in that heroic experiment, he was one of seven still on his feet. He survived, in fact, until 1643 when he was around the age of eighty. William Bradford tells us that he often went without bread and meat during those years, and then notes with some emphasis that the former tavern-keeper endured the worst privation of all:

"He...drunke nothing but water for many years togeather, yea, till within 5 or 6 years of his death."

Yet once again William Brewster's resourcefulness enabled him not only to survive, but even to abound in a small way. Lest we think that these Pilgrims were narrow-minded, anti-intellectuals, we should bear in mind that when William Brewster died in that primitive wilderness he left behind a library of 400 books containing works by Aristotle, Machiavelli and even a recent English play. Lest we think that these people always went around in somber greys, it is worth noting that among Brewster's effects were:

"A red cap, a white cap, a quilted cap, a lace cap, a violet coat, and 1 paire of greene drawers."

But the most important role that William Brewster played in the new world was that of spiritual guide to that little, pioneer community. When the Pilgrims came ashore at Plymouth they were followed by the prayers and best wishes of their minister. But Pastor Robinson himself remained behind and died before he could make the voyage. It was seven years before anyone appeared in that wilderness with the credentials of a clergyman, and he, it seems, was somewhat lacking in the qualities of a Christian. Therefore, when those first American Congregationalists gathered in their little fort for their Lord's Day service it was their elected Elder, William Brewster who led the worship. Bradford tells how the Scrooby postmaster carried out this task and provides us with an estimate of his character:

"He would labor with his hands in the fields as long as he was able: yet when the church had no other minister, he taught twice every Saboth, and that powerfully and profitable.... Yea, many were brought to God by his ministrie. He did more in this behalfe in a year, than many that have their hundreds a year doe in all their lives. For his personal abilities, he was qualified above many: he was wise and discrete and well spoken, having a grave and deliberate utterance, of a very cherfull spirite, very socialble and pleasante amongst his friends, of an humble and modest mind, of a peaceable disposition....He would tell them plainely of their faults and evils, both publickly and privatly, but in such a maner as usually was well taken from him. He was tender harted and compassionate of such as were in miserie, but especially of such as had been of good estable and rank and were fallen into want and poverty, either for goodness and religions sake, or by the injury and oppression of others...and none did more offend him...then such as would hautily and proudly carry and lift themselves..., having little else to commend them but a few fine cloaths, or a little riches more than others.

In teaching he was very moving and stirring of affections.... He had a singular good gift in prayer...in ripping up the con-

science before God...for the governmente of the church, he was
carfull to preserve good order..."

The movement of church reform that gave rise to the Pilgrim Fathers
was a rigorous attempt to make church and society conform to the Bible.
Yet one of the finest spirits of that movement, Richard Baxter, told his
fellow pastors:

"The world is better able to read the nature of religion in a
man's life than in the Bible."

From what little we know of him, William Brewster's life made for
that kind of reading. He was a sturdy pillar of the church, a true founder
and forefather. Yet if we may imagine such a thing, he was a moving pil-
lar, who carried the house of faith into new regions both geographical and
spiritual. He was a ground-breaker in the best tradition of American Con-
gregationalism, a tradition he helped to create. It is a tradition de-
voted to demonstrating the distinction between pawns and pioneers.