ANNE BRADSTREET, POET

Pilgrim Church
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In the year 1650 one of those literary events occurred in the city of London. A book of poems appeared under the title:

THE TENTH MUSE LATELY SPRUNG UP IN AMERICA

The title was meant to attract attention by pointing out that the book was very unusual for two reasons: first, it was written in that strange new continent to the West; second, it was written by a woman. Either of these facts alone was enough to make a literate Londoner raise his eyebrows. But if he could not deduce this information from the title, the title page would fill him in. It read like this:

Several
POEMS
Compiled with great variety of Wit and
Learning, full of Delight;
Wherein especially is contained a compleat
Discourse, and Description of

The Four / Elements
/ Constitutions,
/ Ages of Man,
/ Seasons of the Year.

Together with an exact Epitome of
the three first Monarchies
Viz. The / ASSYRIAN
/ PERSIAN
/ GRECIAN,

With diverse other pleasant & serious Poems,

By a Gentlewoman of New-England

(from second edition of 1678)

Who was this "Gentlewoman of New England"?

Looking further into this remarkable book, the curious person would find an "Epistle to the Reader" written by a recent traveler from America, John Woodbridge. He was a brother-in-law of the author. Unknown to the author, but probably with the collaboration of other members of her family, he had carried her manuscript to England and arranged to have it published. In his message to the reader he confesses that he is afraid to write anything at all lest by comparing his words with those of the poet, people might conclude "It is the gift of women not only to speak most but to speak best." Woodbridge says that undoubtedly many people will question whether a woman could have written such a work. But he avows:

> "It is the work of a woman, honoured and esteemed where she lives, for her gracious demeanour, her eminent parts, her pious conversation, her courteous disposition, her exact diligence in her place, and discrete managing of her family occasions, and more than so, these poems are the fruit but of some few hours, curtailed from her sleep and other refreshments."

One might surmise from all this that already in the year 1650 the people of the old world were being softened up by PR men from the new. But the subject of all this promotion was a quiet, New England housewife named Anne Bradstreet. It was she who wrote the first book of poetry to come out of the New World, and what is generally regarded today as the first American poetry worth reading today.

Anne Bradstreet was born in England in 1612, the daughter of Thomas and Dorothy Dudley. Her father, who also wrote poetry, was the steward, or manager,,of the estates of the Earl of Lincoln. In later years he became governor of Massachusetts Bay Colony. Surviving a bout with smallpox, Anne was married at the age of 16 to Simon Bradstreet, an able young man also in the service of the Earl. After Anne's death, he likewise became governor of Massachusetts Bay. Anne was only 18 in 1630 when she sailed on the Arabella with her husband and father and other leaders of the colony for New England.

(Someone asked me last week - what was the difference between the Pilgrims and the Puritans of Massachusetts Bay. This is a complicated matter, but to state it simply, these groups were very similar in their general outlook, religious beliefs and theories of church government. However, whereas the Pilgrim group had formally separated from the Church of England, the Puritans still considered themselves part of that church on their arrival. In time the two groups flowed together. Our Congregational Churches descend from both of them.)

It was difficult for a young girl brought up in the comfortable and cultivated atmosphere of an Earl's castle to adjust to frontier life. In a little memoir she left for her children, Anne Bradstreet wrote:

> "After a short time I changed my condition and was married, and came into this country, where I found a new world and new manners, at which my heart rose. But after I was convinced it was the way of God, I submitted to it and joined the church at Boston."

After several moves she and her family settled in what is now the community of North Andover. Though much depressed over the lack of children in the early years of her marriage, Anne ultimately bore eight. In 1666 the Bradstreet homestead burned. Their prize library of 800 books and some of Anne's manuscripts were destroyed. But it was the common objects of home that she missed. In her poem called VERSES UPON THE BURNING OF OUR HOUSE, she wrote:

> "Here stood that trunk, and there that chest;
> There lay that store I counted best;
> My pleasant things in ashes lie,
> And them behold no more shall I.
> Under thy roof no guest shall sit,
> Nor at thy table eat a bit;
>
> No pleasant tale shall e'er be told,
> Nor things recounted done of old;
> No candle e'er shall shine in thee,
> Nor bridegroom's voice e'er heard shall be.
> In silence ever shalt thou lie.
> Adieu, adieu; all's vanity."

If you have ever stood in the ruins of a home burned down, you know what that kind of grief is like.

Though she took care of a large family in the wilderness, wrote poetry in the small hours, and took her place among the leaders of early New England society, Anne Bradstreet suffered from periodic illness all her life. She died at the age of 60 in 1672. Among her descendants were William Ellery Channing and the Oliver Wendell Holmes's.

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Now let us consider what the life of this early American Christian, Anne Bradstreet, says to our lives.

First, we find in her a compelling instance of devotion to family. The period in which Anne Bradstreet lived was prolific in lyrics on unrequited love. But here is a woman, married at the age of sixteen, who late in her life writes passionate love poems to her husband. There is the little, sonnet-like poem, which is inserted in today's bulletin.* There are the poems composed as letters to her husband when he was away on business, poems mourning his absence and declaring that despite their parting, she remains,

"Flesh of thy flesh, bone of thy bone
I here, thou there, yet both but one."

There is the most poignant of her poems, addressed to her husband before the birth of one of her children and contemplating the possibility of her death in giving birth.

Hardly less moving are the poems and meditations she wrote about her children and grand-children, her father and mother. In these times when we experience a widespread breakdown in family solidarity, it is heartening to discover this intense family devotion burning in the hearths of those sober Puritan homesteads.

Secondly, Anne Bradstreet brings to us a powerful example of devotion to God. The coloration of her piety is likely to be repugnant to many of us today. There is a tendency to see in every sickness and every misfortune some sign of God's punishment for her own failings. Yet we do feel that she was a woman who found her way to a strong and intimate relationship with the divine Spirit. In the little spiritual autobiography she wrote for her children, she admitted:

> "I have often been perplexed that I have not found that constant joy in my pilgrimage and refreshing which I supposed most of the servants of God have."

Yet she acknowledges too that she has at times "tasted of that hidden manna that the world knows not." In God's love she found the meaning of life. And she wrote:

> "And could I have been in heaven without the love of God, it would have been a hell to me, for in truth it is the absence and presence of God that makes heaven or hell."

Secular historians are attracted to Anne Bradstreet by her frank acknowledgment of the intellectual struggles she went through. She experienced difficulties over the truth of the Scriptures, the doctrine of the

Trinity, and the very reality of God. She also wondered "Why may not the Popish religion be right?" We may think that she attributed such questioning too largely to the influence of Satan. But her spiritual and intellectual struggles lend credibility to her faith. Anne Bradstreet's religion was not something she took for granted because she was brought up to it. It was forged out of her own searching and her own experience.

Among Anne Bradstreet's prose writings is a set of meditations dedicated to her oldest son. The first of these proberb-like pieces sums up the way in which these Puritan people tried to make their religion relevant to every detail of living:

> "There is no object that we see, no action that we do, no good that we enjoy, no evil that we feel or fear, but we may make some spiritual advantage of all; and he that makes such improvement is wise, as well as pious."

Third, we find in Anne Bradstreet an eloquent assertion of woman's right to be creative. The Tenth Muse Lately Sprung Up In America contained several poetic testimonies by men, saying in effect, "for a woman this isn't half bad." But in her own prologue to her poems, Mistress Bradstreet expressed her own feelings about male chauvinism.

> "I am obnoxious to each carping tongue
> Who says my hand a needle better fits,
> A poet's pen all scorn I should thus wrong,
> For such despite they cast on female wits;
> If what I do prove well, it won't advance,
> They'll say it's stolen, or else it was by chance."

and a little further on:

> "Men can do best, and women know it well.
> Preeminence in all and each is yours
> Yet grant some small acknowledgement of ours."

Here is the voice of the first American feminist.

Fourth, Anne Bradstreet testifies to the central place of poetry in the life of humanity. By poetry I mean not only the art of the written word, but all creative expression.

For a long time the artist and the church have been estranged from each other in this country. We tend to blame this estrangement on our Puritan heritage. In large measure this placing of the blame is mistaken. As the great Harvard historian, Petty Miller observed in his introduction to some of Anne Bradstreet's writings:

> "Puritanism was not an anti-intellectual fundamentalism; it was a learned, scholarly movement that required on the part of the leaders, and as much as possible from the followers, not only knowledge but respect for the cultural heritage. Being good classicists, they read Latin and Greek poetry, and tried their hands at composing verses of their own. The amount they wrote, even amid the labor of settling a wilderness, is astonishing."

The poems featured in the first edition of Anne Bradstreet's book are a bore to most people today. They are long, conventional poems on outworn themes in a hackneyed style. What attracts the modern reader are the more intimate poems that come largely from Anne Bradstreet's later years - poems about her love for her husband, the death of a grand-child, a walk in the woods. And while the Puritan approach to art was very narrow in some respects, Anne's religious outlook may have contributed to this breakthrough to a more personal kind of statement. For what the Puritans emphasized in their preaching was the plain, straightforward application of the Christian message to the everyday experiences of living.

It strikes me as especially significant that Anne Bradstreet and others like her should have written poetry right in the midst of taming a wilderness. In succeeding generations American culture has tended to emphasize what it considers to be the practical side of life. Such matters as poetry are relegated to the category of frills that can only be afforded when all the serious work is done. But this way of thinking misunderstands what it means to be practical. To be practical is to put ends and means in proper relationship.

Now I would maintain that the end products of any civilization are its artistic creations. Planting corn, building roads and selling hats are in the nature of means. Such activities are practical in so far as they make it possible for the human spirit to express itself creatively. For man does not live by bread alone.

Did some of you see the television documentary last week on the stone-age people in the Philippines? These people do not hunt; they do not plant gardens; they do not even build houses. But they do sing. It is in their singing that we discover their humanity. Any people that managed a gross national product of several hundred billion but that took singing less seriously than the Tasadai might well be looked upon as somewhat inferior to them.

Anne Bradstreet was not a great poet. But she sang her own songs with her own authentic voice in this American wilderness. Even in the hardest days of struggling to survive she knew that life is more than food and the body more than clothing and human existence more than getting and spending. The ends of life were found in the intense depths of the closest personal relationships, above all that fellowship with God against which, she told her children, the gates of Hell could not prevail. Poetry was her way of saying this. In the end poetry is the only way it can be said.

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* To My Dear and Loving Husband

"If ever two were one, then surely we.
If ever man were loved by wife, then thee.
If ever wife was happy in a man,
Compare with me, ye women, if you can.
I prize thy love more than whole mines of gold,
Or all the riches that the East doth hold.
My love is such that rivers cannot quench,
Nor ought but love from thee give recompense.
Thy love is such I can no way repay;
The heavens reward thee manifold, I pray.
Then, while we live, in love let's so persever.
That when we live no more we may live ever."