

Pilgrims and Puritans as Persecutors

IT is not at all unusual both in America and England for writers and others to confuse the Pilgrims and Puritans of the New England Colonies. An example of this may be seen in Mabel Brailsford's recent excellent work, *Quaker Women, 1650-1690*, p. 94. Speaking of Mary Fisher's visit to Massachusetts, she says: "She . . . tasted the first fruits of the persecution which was meted out to her fellow-believers, even to the extremes of mutilation and death, by those who were themselves the survivors of the *Mayflower*."

In that part of New England which is now known as Massachusetts, there were two distinct colonies, the New Plymouth Colony, and Massachusetts Bay. The former was settled by the Pilgrims who came over in the *Mayflower* (1620), and the latter, Massachusetts Bay, was settled by emigrants from England, who came in detachments, beginning with a band under John Endicott in 1628, followed by a larger number in 1629, and later by others, in quick succession, until, by 1640, twenty thousand colonists were in Massachusetts, most of them having been incited to seek homes in the wilderness by the persecution of Laud and his party. These colonists were not separatists, like the Pilgrims, but were Puritans who wished to purify the Church of England of those beliefs and practices which seemed to them "Popish" or undesirable. Their purpose was to establish a state founded on the Church as they conceived it. Church and State were to be inextricably interwoven. It is impossible to understand the history of the Colony of Massachusetts Bay unless this fact is kept in mind. It explains many things which otherwise seem inexplicable or sometimes strangely vindictive. These Puritans never believed in tolerance, or in religious liberty except for themselves. As early

as 1635, they expelled Roger Williams, and in 1638 John Wheelwright and Anne Hutchinson, on account of their religious views and practices.

The Pilgrims of New Plymouth, on the contrary, were themselves separatists, and during the early years of the Colony there is no reason to believe that they persecuted anyone. Apparently the earliest law restricting religious liberty is dated June 12, 1650; it forbids persons "meeting on the Lord's Day from house to house." Under this law a certain Obadiah Holmes and eight others, including some women, were "presented" October 2nd, 1650. There is no record of what was done to them. Another early "presentment" was that of Arthur Howland who was charged with "not frequenting the publicke assemblyes on the Lord's daies." On September 2nd, 1656, the Governor and Magistrates of Massachusetts Bay wrote a letter to the Commissioners of the United Colonies of New England in which they advise, "some generall rules may be alsoe comended to each Generall court to prevent the coming in amongst vs from foraigne places such Notorious heretiques as quakers, Ranters," etc.¹ A copy of this letter was also sent to Rhode Island, where, doubtless, it received little attention. It was after this letter that the authorities of the Plymouth Colony prescribed the penalties and instituted the persecutions of the Quakers in Plymouth. The first law appears to have been passed June 3rd, 1657, and the persecution to have ceased in 1661. The various penalties inflicted were disfranchisement, banishment, committing to the House of Correction, the stocks or cage, seizing of books and property, fines, and whipping, but in no case, so far as discovered, was there mutilation or death. Nor is there any reason to think that death was ever contemplated. In 1657, William Bradford and John Alden, of the original Pilgrims, were still living, but whether the former had any hand in the special law against the Quakers does not appear. Bradford died in 1657, so it is not likely that he had. John Alden, however, cannot be acquitted of a "fall from grace." At least his name is signed to some of the restrictive legislation.

¹ *Records of New Plymouth*. ii., 162, 174; x., 156.

It is needless to go further into details as all important ones are given in Rufus M. Jones's *Quakers in the American Colonies*, chapters ii. to v., where the whole subject is admirably treated, though the distinction between Pilgrims and Puritans is taken for granted.

In Massachusetts Bay, as the records show, nothing was too harsh or severe if it would keep the hated Quakers away or drive out of the Colony those who were already there. This feeling culminated in the hanging of the four Quakers on Boston Common in 1659-1660. There seems no doubt that in both Colonies the persecutions were almost wholly the work of the ministers and magistrates, not of the people at large, many of whom sympathised with the sufferers.

The change in sentiment in the Plymouth Colony was due to several causes: the death of most of the early Pilgrims; the great increase in population in Massachusetts Bay which brought the inhabitants of the two Colonies nearer together; the natural influence which a powerful neighbor would exert; and, above all, the formation in 1643 of the federal union of the four Colonies of Massachusetts Bay, Plymouth, Connecticut, and New Haven, and hence the overwhelming Puritan influence. It will be noticed that the earliest laws abridging religious liberty in Plymouth were passed in 1650-1651, thirty years after the landing of the Pilgrims, and the first law against the Quakers was in 1657, or thirty-seven years after the arrival of the *Mayflower*. It is, therefore, incorrect to speak of the "survivors of the *Mayflower*" meting out "the extremes of mutilation and death," when neither can be laid to their charge. One can but deeply regret that the charge of persecution cannot be evaded by their successors.

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Note.—This subject was discussed in 1866, 1867 in the columns of *The (London) Friend*, New Series, vols, vi., 236; vii., 17, 166; and in the *Friends' Review*, vol. xx., 83, 498, 517. This discussion was occasioned by a lecture delivered by Benjamin Scott (*The Pilgrim Fathers neither Puritans nor Persecutors*, a Lecture delivered at the Friends' Institute, London, on the 18th of January, 1866, by Benjamin Scott, F.R.S.A., Chamberlain of the City of London, London, 1866). It must be acknowledged that the lecturer claimed somewhat overmuch, while his objectors allowed him too little.