

“A True Prototype of the United States of America—Cosmopolitan, Tolerant, Christian?”: Changing Memories about the Pilgrims from the 19th Century to the Turn of the 20th Century

Shutaro Suzuki

Introduction

The year 2020 marked the 400th anniversary of the founding of the Plymouth Colony in North America. Various commemorative events were held in Plymouth, Massachusetts, and various publications were published.¹ The footsteps of the Pilgrim Fathers, coupled with the existence of the Mayflower Compact, which had supposedly been drawn up aboard the ship, are the story of America’s beginnings and is told to this day. At Plimoth Patuxet Museum—an outdoor interactive history museum near Plymouth—actors recreate the simple life of 17th-century colonists in a “reconstructed” village, transporting visitors 400 years back to New England. It has continued to attract visitors from all over the United States.

Why does the Plymouth Colony occupy such an important place in American memory? Historian Eddie Hyatt writes that “the Pilgrim set the stage for individual and religious liberty and democratic self-government in America.”² The most important story is that the Pilgrims fled the oppression they had suffered in England as Puritan Separatists

and sought religious freedom. In other words, Plymouth is a convenient place to start the myth of “America, the land of the free.” The fact that the Mayflower Compact can be easily interpreted as a prototype of the social contract and the source of American democracy also helps position Plymouth at the beginning of this myth. Historian Makoto Saito argues that “historically, American society has been one of contractual integration of originally pluralistic things.” He also states that the Plymouth narrative of “the formation of a new political entity, a colony, by contracting with common but disparate goals, values, and beliefs, including common maxims, is one of the most important aspects of American democracy.” Plymouth’s narrative—of “the formation of new political organizations and colonies, including within them common maxims, values, and beliefs, but disparate”—was also convenient for American integration.³

Historically, however, it is highly questionable whether Plymouth was truly an important part of American history. First, Plymouth was not the first English colony in North America: before the Plymouth Colony was founded in 1620, the founding of a colony had been attempted in the 1580s on Roanoke Island, present-day North Carolina. Further, the first permanent colony, Jamestown, was settled in 1607, and it developed into the Virginia Colony. Plymouth was not “the beginning of America,” while at Jamestown, there was a record of people forcibly brought from Africa in 1619. In other words, the story of the beginning of America in Virginia relates directly to the story of the beginning of slavery in America. This is one of the reasons why Plymouth was chosen as the basis of the United States’ origin story.

Plymouth was also a short-lived colony, absorbed by the neighboring Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1691. At its largest, the population of Plymouth Colony was approximately 500. Massachusetts

Bay, settled by non-separating Puritans in 1630, grew to a population of 20,000 in the decade that followed. The “insignificant” small colony of Plymouth was swallowed up by a larger neighboring colony in just over 70 years. However, this can be perceived differently. In 1692, a year after Plymouth’s disappearance, an infamous witch hunt broke out in the Massachusetts Bay village of Salem. Subsequently, each English colony in North America continued to expand with various problems. In any case, Plymouth can be considered a colony that disappears, in the truest sense of the word.

According to historian Naoki Onishi, in his detailed examination of the mythology surrounding Plymouth, “the workings of the Plymouth Colony have greater significance as a ‘myth’ than as a historical fact.”⁴ He focuses on the mythologizing of Plymouth in the context of America’s growing national identity and patriotism, from the founding era to the 20th century. According to him, in the United States, there is often “a form of patriotism or character that is required at the outset, and history is arbitrarily used to shape it”—and for this purpose, “the history of the Plymouth Colony has been deliberately exploited.”⁵

The Plymouth Colony has not always been consistently cherished by Americans since its inception. Onishi examines the process by which the memory of Plymouth became a national memory over the 19th century, by examining the speeches of John Quincy Adams in 1802, Daniel Webster in 1820 (the bicentennial year), and Sarah Josepha Hale and Abraham Lincoln in 1863; it was Lincoln who made Thanksgiving a national holiday. This article also examines, in detail, the process by which the memory of Plymouth became national memory over the 19th century. As will be discussed at the end of this article, the discourse surrounding the Plymouth Colony seems to have undergone a “demythologizing” process in recent years, owing, in part, to historical

findings and political-correctness considerations. It is important to remember that the English settlement of New England, beginning with Plymouth, was the beginning of the oppression of the indigenous people of the region. In any case, the story of Plymouth can be said to have been most mythologized in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Previous studies have not clarified the background of American acceptance of the Plymouth story around 1900. Saito suggests that a story that united the populace was needed at a time when a massive influx of immigrants was causing diversity within the United States, which was emerging as a “problem” to be solved. Onishi indicates that “The more the United States becomes a superpower as a hegemonic nation, the more the desire for Plymouth as an origin deepens.”⁶ However, to clarify this issue, it may be necessary to examine, in detail, changes in how the Plymouth story has been received, while relating it to the United States’ historical background. In this article, I examine the reception of the Plymouth story in the 19th century, paying close attention to the changes in each period, and then examine how the story came to be interpreted in America at the turn of the 20th century. For the former, I focus on descriptions of the Pilgrims’ arrival in Plymouth, as found in several history textbooks. For the latter, I will focus on depictions of the Pilgrims as found in the publications of the Royal Worcester Corset Company (RWCC). Barry Joyce examined descriptions of Plymouth as found in early 19th-century American history textbooks. However there was little examination of those after the late 19th century, when the importance of Plymouth in American history increased.⁷ In this article, I examine the process by which Plymouth became the founding myth of the United States during this period.

1. Memories of the Pilgrims in 19th-Century America

One of the most notable history textbooks published in the 19th century is *Exercises in History, Chronology and Biography, in Question and Answer, for the Use of Schools*, written by Susanna Rowson in 1822. Born in Portsmouth, England in 1762, Rowson moved to the United States with her husband in 1793 and opened a boarding school, the Young Ladies Academy, in Boston in 1797.⁸ In 1800, Rowson moved the academy from its cramped Boston premises to Medford, five miles away from the city. By this time, students had come from all over the United States and even from the British West Indies. The academy taught subjects such as reading, grammar, composition, history, arithmetic, and geography.⁹

Rowson’s *Exercises in History* were intended for use in her academic classes.¹⁰ Her historical account begins with the “creation” of the world by God and continues with the expulsion of the parents of the entire human race from Eden and the death of Abel. Many historians have pointed out the strong influence of the Old Testament on the American view of history up to the 19th century. In particular, the view of history in the *Ussher Chronology of World History*—developed by James Ussher, an Irish clergyman in the 17th century—was the mainstream view.¹¹ According to historian Yoshiyuki Kido, this tendency continued until the ideas embedded in Darwin’s theory of evolution, published in 1859, became widespread; this can also be seen in Rowson’s *Exercises in History*.¹² Its account of American history begins with Christopher Columbus’s “discovery” of America, but it places little emphasis on the founding of the Plymouth Colony. The description of the English colonies begins with Virginia, followed by Maryland, Pennsylvania, Delaware, New Jersey, New York, and

Connecticut founded in 1633, and finally, the topic of Plymouth in 1620.

Massachusetts was settled 1620, by a number of pious persons who left England with their pastor, Mr Robinson, for conscience sake, and landed in the depth of winter upon the rocky shores of Cape Cod. Here they made their first settlement, and soon spread themselves through the then wild territory, now one of the best cultivated and most fertile states in the union.¹³

Notably, neither the name of Plymouth nor the *Mayflower* appears in this account: it is merely said that some “pious persons” led by Mr. Robinson reached the shores of Cape Cod. Rowson had made no distinction between the histories of Plymouth and Massachusetts Bay, despite the fact they had been separate colonies in the 17th century. Moreover, according to historical records, John Robinson, the leader of the Puritan Separatists, never reached Plymouth; rather, he remained in Leiden, Holland, and saw off his congregation as they headed to America. Thus, in terms of both volume and accuracy, it is clear that the story of Plymouth had not been given considerable weight in the historical accounts of America.

The next book to be examined is *Blair's Outlines of Chronology, Ancient, and Modern*, by John Blair, published in Boston in 1826.¹⁴ Like Rowson's book—which had been published by the same publisher in Boston—it was intended to be a textbook for elementary history classes in schools. In Blair's book, the Pilgrims' arrival in America is positioned as a religious event, as evidenced by the chapter titled “Edict of Nantes.” In other words, the story of the Pilgrims is positioned as a massive population movement in and out of the Protestant European world. After describing the founding of the Virginia Colony by the

British, the account goes on to say that a group of Puritans arrived in America from England via Holland in search of freedom.

The first settlement in the northern district [...] was made in 1620. A number of puritans, having, a few years ago, left England, to free themselves from a persecuting hierarchy, and found an asylum in Holland, set sail for America, which they reached on the 22nd of December, in the above named year.¹⁵

Thus, it is suggested that Plymouth and Virginia marked the beginning of America, and that Plymouth Colony was especially important to “the connexion with the civil and religious liberty of mankind.”¹⁶ Elsewhere, the text states that the Puritans not only practiced their faith themselves, but also proselytized to the indigenous people in the region.

The *puritans*, who settled New-England, not only carried Christianity into their own societies, but propagated it with some success among the Indians.¹⁷

Both Rowson and Blair’s books were published in Boston, not far from Plymouth. Nevertheless, the fact that these books’ narratives concerning the Pilgrims are not so literal—and are somewhat inaccurate—may indicate that the Plymouth narrative had not yet been established as a device to foster American national unity in early 19th-century America.

In contrast, Emma Willard’s *History of the United States, or, Republic of America*, published in New York in 1828, contains a description of the Plymouth myth; its use has since become commonplace.¹⁸ In 1821,

Willard founded the Troy Female Seminary in Troy, New York, a city near Albany where she practiced advanced education from classical and ancient history and philosophy to Latin, algebra, and geometry.¹⁹ She also wrote and published a large number of texts for use in the seminary.²⁰ In particular, the *History of the United States* is a large book of nearly 500 pages that describes the period from Columbus's arrival in the Americas in 1492 to John Quincy Adams's inauguration as President in 1825.

Whereas Rowson's and Blair's history textbooks were about world history, Willard's is dedicated to the history of the United States. And hence, her account of Plymouth Colony follows a detailed, eight-page explanation of the construction of the Virginia Colony. What is notable about her description of the Virginia Colony is that it states that in 1619, a Dutch ship forcibly brought Africans on board who were purchased by colony members at the Verge. After that, the number of people brought from Africa increased rapidly and "the whole field-work in Virginia was in a short time performed by the hands of slaves."²¹ In other words, Willard, who is a Northerner, contrasts Plymouth's description with that of southern Virginia, where the foundations of slavery were being laid from the beginning of the colony's construction.

Plymouth's account begins with some English Puritans leaving the Anglican Church to seek religious freedom, first in the Netherlands and then in America.

A hundred and twenty persons sailed from England on this arduous enterprise. They performed the voyage in a single ship called the May-Flower. [...]

The first land in America which they made was Cape Cod.²²

Willard's account is noteworthy for its description of the contract made by the crew of the *Mayflower*, which later came to be known as the Mayflower Compact.

Being without the limits of their patent, as to civil government they were in a state of nature. They therefore drew up and signed a civil compact, by which they severally bound themselves to be obedient to all the ordinances made by the body, and acknowledged the king of Great Britain to be their lawful sovereign.²³

According to Onishi, the Mayflower Compact was first mentioned by President John Quincy Adams in 1802 as a founding myth that the United States should remember. Adams praised the Compact, which was created voluntarily by the members of the community, as the origin of the United States' Constitution.²⁴ Willard's description of Plymouth, as well as her description of the Mayflower Compact, contained many of the elements that would later become the prototype for the founding myths. Willard's account of Plymouth is more in-depth than that offered in Charles Goodrich's textbook, which was published three years later (which I will discuss in the next section). According to education historian Aki Sakuma, Willard's educational philosophy was based on an American view of women termed Republican Motherhood.²⁵ Willard devoted herself to women's education in order to nurture women as mothers and teachers, and thus, improve the American republic. Willard's detailed description of Plymouth in the *History of the United States*, therefore, needs to be interpreted in the context of her goal of educating America such that it becomes a better country.

2. Changes in Writing in *The Child's History of the United States*

The most widely used history textbook in 19th-century America was *The Child's History of the United States* by Charles Goodrich.²⁶ First published in 1831, it was the best-selling textbook in Early America, selling 500,000 copies by 1870.²⁷ Here, I compare the 1831 edition to the 1878 edition (which was revised after Goodrich's death) and to a book by Charles Morris written in 1900 bearing the exact same title.

In the 1831 edition, the story of Plymouth came after the founding of Virginia and New York. There, the distinction between Plymouth and Massachusetts Bay is still not made, but the Puritan arrival in America is described for two pages.

In 1620, another vessel came from England, bringing people who began to settle *Massachusetts*. On board this vessel, there were an hundred and one persons. The name of the vessel in which they came was the *Speedwell*.

These persons were a *religious* set of people. They were called *Puritans*; and this name was given them, because they wished to worship God in a *purer* manner than other people did in England. But this they were not allowed to do in peace, and so they concluded to come to America.²⁸

It goes on to say that they named the land Plymouth, and it describes the rock on which they first set foot there, the so-called "Plymouth Rock."

They landed on the twenty-second of December. They landed on a rock, which since that time has been called "*Forefathers' Rock*."

The first person who jumped out of the boat on to the rock, was a girl, by the name of *Mary Chilton*.²⁹

However, this description is inaccurate. What is particularly disturbing is that the ship they came on is described as the *Speedwell*, not the *Mayflower*. This was the ship that actually left for America with the *Mayflower*, but had to abandon its plan due to a breakdown. The name of the ship on which they sailed came to be seen as important and deserving of memory only after the "Mayflower Compact," including its name, was established and its value was widely recognized by the American people.

The 1878 edition, revised by A. B. Berard after Goodrich's death, clearly names the *Mayflower*:

Their frail vessel, the *May-Flower*, was tossed about by wind and storm, and, after a voyage of three weary months, made land on the bleak coast of New England [...]. It was in the bitter weather of December when the *May-Flower* cast anchor in Cape Cod Bay.³⁰

The quiz in the appendix of that book asks for the name of the ship on which they sailed, showing that the *Mayflower* had become a name to be remembered.³¹ A new addition to the 1831 edition is the description of Pilgrims' interactions with regional indigenous people.

The year before the Pilgrims came, a pestilence had carried off a great many of the savage Indians, and the first red man they saw met them with the cheering salutation, "Welcome, Englishmen! Welcome, Englishmen!" His name was Samoset; he came from what is now Maine, and had learned to speak English from the

captain of a fishing-vessel on the coast.³²

Thus, it is written that the Pilgrims were welcomed by the area's indigenous people, and it is evident that the publication was made after it was discussed that Thanksgiving would become a national holiday. However, the historical fact is that it was not Samoset who spoke English, but Squanto who was his companion, and that he spoke English because he had been captured by a European ship and taken to London as a slave.³³ The late 19th century was also a time of so-called "Indian Wars" in the American West, and the story of the friendship between Europeans and Indigenous peoples must have been considered something that should be read to children at that time.

In Morris's 1900 edition, following six pages of description of the Virginia Colony—including the rescue of John Smith by Pocahontas—the five-page Plymouth narrative begins.³⁴ The use of the word "Pilgrims" here, along with the place name Plymouth, differentiates it from the work of Goodrich.

These people are known as Pilgrims. They had been badly treated at home because they did not believe in the doctrines of the Church of England, and they had come across the stormy sea to find a place where they could worship God in their own way, without fear of being put in prison.³⁵

After the description of the Pilgrims' founding of Plymouth, the founding of Massachusetts Bay by non-separating Puritans is detailed. For example, the expulsion of Roger Williams and the founding of the colony of Rhode Island are clearly separated from the Plymouth story. In addition to describing friendly relations with Indigenous peoples at

the beginning of Plymouth Colony, the book also describes a harsh war with them that followed.³⁶ In this way, Morris's account is characterized by its efforts to ensure historical accuracy, while devoting many pages to the story of Plymouth as something that American children should remember.

As described above, one can see that the descriptions of Plymouth in 19th-century history textbooks became more accurate and wordy over time. These changes were in response to the growing interest in Plymouth as a place where America began.

3. Industrialization and *The Pilgrim Spirit*

Starting in the late 19th century, Worcester—located approximately 70km west of Boston—expanded as an industrial city by absorbing immigrant workers. Between 1890 and 1910, 22,000 immigrants arrived in Worcester, and the city's foreign-born population grew by 82%.³⁷ Industrialization and the influx of immigrants made Worcester the center of the corset industry in the United States, with the largest factory operated by the RWCC.

The RWCC was started as a hoop and skirt factory in 1861 by David H. Fanning. By 1895, he built a huge corset factory that became a large company employing up to 2,000 female workers.³⁸ According to the 1900 census, 16% of workers in the Worcester corset factory were born in the United States to parents who had originally lived there, 61% were born in the United States to immigrant parents, and 23% were first-generation immigrant women.³⁹ Second-generation immigrants—namely, young single women who were about to become Americans—comprised the largest group. While the RWCC often touted in their publicity materials the fullness of these women's lives, there were also

many depictions of them as immigrants or daughters of immigrants that emphasized their “American” status.⁴⁰

The RWCC’s publicity materials made numerous attempts to associate itself with the memory of the founding of Massachusetts, including the founding of the Plymouth Colony and the Revolutionary War. Fanning’s *The Pilgrim Spirit: 1620-1921*, published in 1921, promoted the RWCC’s activities as being in the spirit of the Pilgrims who arrived in Plymouth on the *Mayflower* in 1620.

History clearly shows that the thing called *progressiveness*, or perhaps the more modern expression “pep” was dominant among all the Pilgrims from the time they sailed from Plymouth, England, in September, 1620. They believed absolutely that “where there’s a will there’s a way.”⁴¹

Fanning’s book begins with a detailed description of the Pilgrim Fathers of 1620, and links their experiences to the “progressiveness” that characterized America. The book emphasizes that what they were seeking was “complete freedom for their thoughts and desires,” and it points out that their virtue was found in their strong will to be spontaneous and unafraid of difficulties. The conclusion of this section states that the Pilgrim community was a prototype for the United States.

The Pilgrims were always a righteous, God-fearing people and always believed in and demanded freedom. The Pilgrim republic was a true prototype of the United States of America, cosmopolitan, tolerant, Christian.⁴²

The 19th-century American history textbooks examined in Section

2 merely list the establishment of the Plymouth Colony as one of many episodes occurring in various parts of colonial America. *The Pilgrim Spirit*, however, clearly sets Pilgrims as the origin of the United States. It does not specify how cosmopolitan or tolerant the Pilgrims were. It does say that "the Indian resented the white man's coming." However, there are no specific descriptions regarding how tolerant the indigenous people or the Pilgrims were.⁴³

The next section of the booklet, titled "The March of Progress," provides an overview of industrial and technological progress in the United States.

During the two hundred years following the Pilgrims, the history of the development of America is most fascinating and should be read and studied by all. But from 1800 on, and particularly from 1830 and along to 1900, there are many notable events and inventions which in later years had a very noticeable effect upon life in this country.⁴⁴

The booklet lists several American advances, including the following: the "first practical reaper invented in 1831 by Silas McCormick"; the telegraph, invented by Morse in 1837; Elias Howe's invention of the sewing machine, in 1841; the Centennial Exposition at Philadelphia, in 1876; and Edison's so-called "Talking machine," invented in 1878.⁴⁵ Thus, as an extension of American innovations such as the settlement of the West, the mass production of crops in vast areas, and inventions in the urban industry, the RWCC's description of advanced corset manufacturing technology is also distinctive. The book also includes illustrations of women's fashion from the mid-19th century to the turn of the 20th century, such as crinoline and the bustle,

emphasizing the “progress” of clothing culture and the significance of RWCC’s continued production of the corset as an indispensable fashion item.⁴⁶ In this way, the turning point of the 20th century is portrayed as an era of “progress.” From such a perspective, *The Pilgrim Spirit* describes the history of the United States as a history of progress. This school of thought led to the emphasis on Plymouth as the “origin of America.”

Conclusion

As mentioned, the story of Plymouth was remembered by Americans throughout the 19th century. This becomes evident as one reviews 19th-century history textbooks of the United States. What had been a minor anecdote juxtaposed with the founding of the Atlantic colonies of Virginia and New York became a more accurate and detailed account of Plymouth. Furthermore, changes in 19th-century history textbooks reveal the origins of the myths that the United States was established by people who came to America in search of freedom. The Mayflower Compact was a prototype for the United States’ Constitution, and aspects of diversity and tolerance were seen in Europeans’ relations with indigenous peoples.

Descriptions of the Pilgrims in RWCC publications clearly draw a connection between the Plymouth Colony (as the beginning of America) and the prosperity of the RWCC (at its then-current point in the history of progress). Another noteworthy aspect in those publications is the emphasis on the industriousness of Fanning, the founder of RWCC, from a young age. The connection between industriousness in manufacturing and Puritan beliefs is also reminiscent of Max Weber’s focus on Protestant-derived industries in New England colonies, and

how the “middle-class outlook of the Puritans” in New England colonies was recognized as an important origin for the development of the United States.⁴⁷ Indeed, in reading the materials reviewed in this article, it becomes clear that such a perspective may not have been Weber’s own. In any case, following the Civil War and at the turn of the 20th century, when the United States became one of the world’s leading economic powers, it may have been natural for Americans to home in on Plymouth as the origin of their country.

In this article, I examined historical narratives from the 19th century to the early 20th century. However, attention should also be paid to how the memory of Plymouth will be discussed in the United States in the future. On the 400th anniversary of Plymouth’s founding, there has been an attempt to move beyond Eurocentric narratives.⁴⁸ Plymouth’s hands-on history museum, Plimoth Plantation, changed its name to Plimoth Patuxet Museum in July 2020 to focus more on Patuxet and other indigenous exhibits.⁴⁹ In Eric Foner’s *Give Me Liberty!: An American History*, a United States’ history textbook widely used in high schools and colleges in the United States today, Plymouth occupies fewer than two of the more than 40 pages devoted to the founding of British colonies in North America.⁵⁰ Instead, Foner devotes space to the diversity of the colonies within North America, the relationship between Europeans and indigenous peoples, and the establishment of black slavery. It remains to be seen how America, a land of diversity, will incorporate the story of the Pilgrims into the story of its founding.

Notes

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