PEN PORTRAITURE IN SEVENTEENTH CENTURY COLONIAL HISTORIANS

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I HAVE often wondered whether it might not be possible to give, by the use of certain conventional signs, some more lifelike features to the engraved portraits of celebrities. Why might not the color of a man's hair, for instance, be indicated by vertical or by horizontal lines, just as colors in heraldry are? I recall my surprise on first going to the Reform Club in London to see a painted portrait of Macaulay, which gave him blonde hair and blue eyes. From the engravings of his portraits, which I had seen all my life, I had supposed that he was dark. Such a scheme as I suggest might also include facts as to the subject's size. Is it not absurd that Bismark and Lord John Russell should be engraved as if they were nearly equal in height, whereas Bismarck was really twelve or fourteen inches taller than Lord John? The illustrations of animals or birds in the dictionary indicate one-tenth, one-fifth, one-third or natural size. And so at a glance you are enabled to see, for instance, that a chameleon and a crocodile are not of equal length. Would it not be worth while in behalf of accuracy, which is the ideal of historians, to try for accuracy in this field? I make this suggestion in the hope that engravers may consider it worthy of their attention.

But what I desire to discuss here is the written descriptions in the Seventeenth Century of some of the old colonial personages, and I have reference not merely to the pen portraits of externals—of features and of bodies—but of men's characters. If one of us,

for example, were to see and to know any of those old worthies, should we, in describing him, use the same language as Bradford, or Winthrop, or Cotton Mather used? Did not they, instinctively, emphasize certain qualities which we might think unimportant?

The art of making pen-portraits which shall be striking and presumably lifelike, is almost as rare as that of the portrait painter. During the Seventeenth Century in England only one historian, so far as I remember, deserves to be called a master-portraitist. I refer, of course, to Edward Hyde, 1st Earl of Clarendon, whose sketches of some of the leaders of the English Revolution have rarely been excelled.

Of the New England historians in the Seventeenth Century to whom I shall refer, there are three: William Bradford, who wrote the "History of Plymouth Plantation"; John Winthrop, author of a "Journal," called "A History of New England"; and Cotton Mather, who gives to his "Magnalia Christi Americana" the expanded sub-title "The Ecclesiastical History of New England, from its first planting in the year 1620, unto the year of our Lord, 1698." Bradford and Winthrop were born in England, the former at Austerfield, Yorkshire, in 1590, and the latter at Groton in 1587. Cotton Mather, born in 1663 at Boston, the son of Increase, born at Dorchester in 1639, was accordingly a full-fledged colonist. In temperament, and by education, he was much more intellectual than either Winthrop or Bradford, who shone pre-eminently as men of action and of affairs. Mather's chief intellectual interest being theology, he overweighted his "Magnalia"with theological matters. Bradford and Winthrop, however, wrote plain, straightforward chronicles, devoid of attempts at literary embellishment, and wonderfully interesting to us now for their sincerity. They set down items which often seem trivial or unimportant but which we feel make in the mass, a truthful mosaic of the events and of the environments. If Cotton Mather were

riding to Salem or to Concord, I imagine that he would be so absorbed by a controversy he was carrying on in his head, that instead of taking much notice of the country as he passed, he would be busy thinking of passages from Sovinus or Bucer or Zwingli or Leviticus with which to refute his adversary. Whereas, Bradford or Winthrop, going on a journey, would observe things by the wayside and, in the evening, would set them down in his journal.

Take, for instance, the last entry in Winthrop's Journal (January 11, 1649) in which he records that "about eight persons were drowned this winter, all by adventuring upon the ice," and then he adds:

"This puts me in mind of another child very strangely drowned a little before winter. The parents were also members of the church of Boston. The father had undertaken to maintain the mill-dam, and being at work upon it, (with some help he had hired,) in the afternoon of the last day of the week, night came upon them before they had finished what they intended, and his conscience began to put him in mind of the Lord's day, and he was troubled, yet went on and wrought an hour within night. The next day, after evening exercise, and after they had supped, the mother put two children to bed in the room where themselves did lie, and they went out to visit a neighbor. When they returned, they continued about an hour in the room, and missed not the child, but then the mother going to bed, and not finding her youngest child, (a daughter about five years of age) after much search she found it drowned in a well in her cellar; which was very observable, as by a special hand of God, that the child should go out of that room into another in the dark, and then fall down at a trap door, or go down the stairs, and so into the well in the farther end of the cellar, the top of the well and the water being even with the ground. But the father freely in the open congregation, did acknowledge it

the righteous hand of God for his profaning his holy day against the checks of his own conscience."

This seems merely an ephemeral event—the report of an accident by which a little girl of five comes to her death by drowning. The other day, in the morning paper, I read that a little boy of five accidentally was hanged in the back-yard by being entangled in the clothes-line. That, too, was pathetic, but I do not suppose that a reader who should come upon that item two hundred and seventy years from now would find it nearly so striking as we find that last entry in Winthrop's Journal, two hundred and seventy years after he wrote it. What makes Winthrop's record significant is, not the accident by which the little girl was killed, but the state of mind of her father and of the community. For them it had a religious interpretation.

When we seek for portraits in the three books, which represent Seventeenth Century worthies in Massachusetts, we find only their lack. Many men and women are mentioned, but I do not recall a single vivid outline of the face or figure of any of them. If a procession of their *Mayflower* ancestors were to pass before *Mayflower* descendants of this time, who take credit to themselves for having had such ancestors, I doubt whether the descendants would be able to recognize them. Certainly, Bradford gives no clue as to physiognomies. Family tradition, perhaps, may have handed down some detail about the shape of the nose or the color of the hair, but a real pen-portrait, so far as I am aware, has not survived.

I refer now to externals, to the bodily form and presence. When it comes to character sketches, to the portrayal of temperament, and of passions, of qualities and of personal caprices, there is no dearth. How unindividualizing they are! Cotton Mather composes the biography of four of the chief divines in Boston and the neighboring country. He elaborates, with the evident purpose of being precise, a portrait of

each, but I believe that if I should read you what Cotton Mather says about them, without revealing their names, you would be puzzled to know which was of John Cotton, which of John Wilson, which of John Norton and which of John Davenport. His subject is the Generic Minister, rather than the individual man. Indeed, the ghost of that Generic Minister stalks ubiquitously through the colony of the Seventeenth Century, as the ghost of Hamlet's father haunts the tragedy of *Hamlet.*

And is not the same true of Governor Bradford's sketch of Elder Brewster, which is evidently one which the Governor took great pains in composing, and wrote with special fervor? If Brewster were to come into the door now, would any of us recognize him by this description, which Bradford gives of him? "For his personal abilities he was qualified above many; he was wise and discreete and well spoken, having a grave and deliberate utterance, of a very cheerful spirite, very sociable and pleasante amongst his friends, of an humble and modest mind, of a peaceable disposition, under vallewing him self and his owne abilities, and some time over valewing others; inoffencive and innocente in his life and conversation, which gained him the love of those without, as well as those within; yet he would tell them plainely of their faults and evills both publickly and privately, but in such a manner as usually was well taken from him. He was tender harted and compassionate of such as were in miserie, but espetialy of such as had been of good estate and ranke, and were fallen unto want and poverty, either for goodness and religions sake, or by the injury and oppression of others; he would say, of all men these deserved to be pitied most."

Cotton Mather, in his life of Mr. Thomas Hooker, "The Light of the Western Churches" and "Pillar of Connecticut Colony," says that Hooker "was indeed of a very condescending spirit, not only towards his brethren in the ministry, but also towards the meanest

of any Christians whatsoever. He was very willing to sacrifice his own apprehensions into the convincing reason of another man; and very ready to acknowledge any mistake, or failing, in himself."

I need not go on to multiply a score or more of similarly abstract references to Hooker. By "abstract" I mean descriptions that would probably apply to a hundred different ministers—or laymen, as for that—of Hooker's time.

This habit of portraying Characters was popular in the Seventeenth Century, particularly in France where such a master of miniatures as La Bruyère raised it to a high level of art. There was a conventional doctor, or courtier, or obdurate father, or flighty lady, or pompous divine, and whenever one of those characters came on the stage he had the conventional qualities. The object of the writer seemed to be to discover and describe the formula proper to each variety. I do not deny that by this method great results may be achieved. Corneille used it; Racine used it; and Molière, greater than either of them, produced masterpieces by it. The Latin genius, which survived so largely in the French, spoke through it. And yet anybody, Anglo-Saxon by inheritance and by education, cannot but feel that the greatest of the creations shaped on the Latin model fall short of the Anglo-Saxon. Tartuffe lacks something which Iago has; Phèdre belongs to a different world from that of Lady Macbeth. I do not mean to say that our admiration for one should exclude us from admiring another, but there is, after all, something in our Anglo-Saxon blood which makes us respond to Shakespeare in a way we do not respond to Molière. Voltaire, of course, Voltaire, quick of wit and restless of intellect, still acknowledged the supremacy of formulas which are intuitive in the Gallic mind. And Voltaire pronounced Shakespeare a barbarian. We must always take care to allow for the racial bias in ourselves and others when we judge works of art.

Is it because of this that Longfellow, who fell far short of Molière or of Shakespeare in dramatic talent, succeeded, as it seems to me, far better than did Winthrop or Bradford or Mather, in portraying the Puritan men and women of the Seventeenth Century? In his "New England Tragedies" we understand the motives of the *dramatis personae*, who are individualized persons and not mere types spun over with a cobweb of opinions and reflections proper to their respective type. For the sake of historic accuracy, we must be sure that Longfellow has not projected back into their minds ideas peculiar to himself or to his time.

I suspect that the description of the Seventeenth Century Puritan, which has come to be accepted as the most lifelike, lacks many touches in order to do justice to the individual. Even some of the ministers knew what cakes and ale were, and enjoyed them. They did not all dress in sombre black, but they had suits of plum-colored stuffs and of russet and of other colors, which we men might be glad to have at our service now; so that when the village fathers walked to church through the snow-quilted fields they by no means looked like a procession of crows. But, of course, since ministers were great personages, we hear much of them and especially since Cotton Mather, himself a minister, devoted himself to writing biographies of the more famous ministers. Even so, the point that I have tried to make is, that his portraits of John Cotton, John Norton, Thomas Hooker, and the rest, are not lifelike in our modern sense. They represent certain generic types but not individuals, each of whom has definite features unlike those of his neighbors.

It would be interesting to know the cause of the lack of individualized portraits in the chronicles of Winthrop, Bradford and Cotton Mather. A glance at the development of Painting shows us that ability to paint the face came long after artists had acquired considerable skill in painting bodies. Some of us feel that

Portraiture is the highest branch of Painting. No doubt those Colonial historians were but awkward and unpracticed craftsmen at pen-portraits. Cotton Mather, I surmise, felt so much pride in making an apt quotation from Peter Martyr or Erasmus, that it did not occur to him to say whether John Cotton had auburn hair or yellow curls. The things which concerned him were the theological.

I am struck by the fact that this attitude of our earliest American historians has remained a characteristic of many of the later ones down to this day. The two chief living writers of American history seem to me to be deficient in this regard. Perhaps this may be owing to the materialistic view of history, which has prevailed in Germany and been brought over here by our students, who frequented the German Universities. It takes a different talent to divine the inner nature of an historical personage from that which measures the size of the sheets of paper, and, of the kind of ink, used by the writers of historical documents. Small wonder, therefore, that the documentarian is now sometimes mistaken for a historian.

The fashionable doctrine that men count for nothing; that the only true history is that which describes the course of great movements, and the ebb and flow of principles and institutions, further accounts for the slighting, not to say the ignoring, of the individual. One of our most learned contemporary students of history declares that Napoleon was a negligible quantity. After such a declaration, when one has recovered sufficient breath to say anything, what can one say more appropriate than the vulgar Yankee idiom, "I want to know!" Unless it be to suggest that the historian in question made a mistake in choosing history for his subject. He ought to be disporting himself in the wildernesses of geology and the abysses of astronomy.

I have recently been assured by another bibliographer that the time is soon coming when no more

history will be written but only doctors' theses and short papers by specialists for specialists on special minute topics. This may be true, but I predict that what has been called history from the time of Thucydides to that of Sir George Trevelyan will continue to be written for those whose chief interest is Man and human evolution as influenced by the will of Man. The documentarians and bibliographers may have a free field to work in, but do not let them suppose that they can usurp the name of History for their products.

The development of the art of Fiction hints at what that of the art of writing History will be. Fiction, for a long time, busied itself with imaginary or conventional persons. Then it came closer and closer to life, and now, the characters in the consumate novels indisputably live. So will it be with the great characters and the small of History. So it is already in the works of the great historians. Perhaps the day will come when a historian will take the Seventeenth Century Puritans for his subject and make them *live* flesh and blood lives as really as Hawthorne made some of them live in Fiction.

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