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Review Of "One Small Candle: The Plymouth Puritans And The Beginning Of English New England" By F. J. Bremer

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Francis J. Bremer. *One Small Candle: The Plymouth Puritans and the Beginning of English New England.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2020. 272 pp. \$27.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-751004-9.

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Commissioned by Troy Bickham (Texas A&M University)

Professor Francis Bremer's *One Small Candle: The Plymouth Puritans and the Beginning of English New England* traces the journey of the Scrooby-Leiden puritans to Plymouth. Frequently using the perspective of English puritan William Brewster, this history shows Bremer's mastery of puritan sources, history, and historiography, and also marks the 400th anniversary of the colonization at Plymouth. This book covers a fairly brief period of time and a small group of people, giving space for a close examination, focusing mainly on religious history but also including book history, Native history, and biographical details.

A prologue contrasts Brewster's experience in the "bleak winter landscape of Cape Cod," its freezing temperatures, food scarcity, and illness with his life in the "green countryside of northern England," Cambridge, the court of Elizabeth I, and Dutch cities (p. 4). Reminding us that the survival of the Plymouth colony was not assured, the introduction addresses what Bremer calls the "recent scholarly disdain" in recent studies of puritanism (p. 6). *One Small Candle* focuses "on a world in which the boundary between the spiritual and the material did not exist," places the history of Plymouth in that world, and examines its impact on New England through four themes (p. 7). These

themes are that the Scrooby-Leiden-Plymouth congregation fit solidly within the puritan movement, the laity shaped their religious values and institutions, believers searched for a better understanding of God, and ultimately, Plymouth had a greater influence on the religious institutions of Massachusetts than has generally been acknowledged.

Chapter 1 covers the Reformation and the role played by lay Christians. A rise in lay empowerment provides the context for Bremer to place the Scrooby-Leiden-Plymouth congregation within the puritan movement. This chapter also begins Brewster's story, from his education, employment, and marriage in England to his library and life with his congregation. The second chapter describes the practice of prophesying; that is, the sharing of interpretation of the Bible or religious viewpoints. It also discusses the puritan goals of reforming churches from within and ongoing criticism of the Church of England. This chapter includes the first theme of the book, making it clear that the Scrooby-Leiden-Plymouth congregation was within the puritan movement, exemplified by the congregation leaving Lincolnshire in the face of imprisonment and punishment, to look for religious freedom in Europe.

The third chapter follows the congregation to the Netherlands, a particularly valuable and less-studied story. This is the story of English immigrants who did not speak the language or know the customs, in a country with a rising risk of war. In this setting, the laity's impact on the faith and its institutions was important, yet still in accordance with their puritan beliefs. Chapter 4 continues to demonstrate the importance of the lay leadership as they looked for an alternative to Leiden. Brewster and Robinson wrote to the Virginia Company because of worries about the strain of separatism of the company leadership, the king, and the Privy Council. The desired royal guarantee of religious freedom was difficult to get with no support from the archbishop of Canterbury. When eventually Brewster left Leiden with other members of the congregation, Robinson stayed behind with a majority of the members who were reluctant to go for a number of reasons. The chapter ends with the arrival of the *Speedwell* and *Mayflower* after sixty-six days at sea, during which supplies were short and bad weather impeded their progress.

Chapter 5 focuses on Native peoples before the arrival of the Leiden congregation. With an estimated population of two hundred thousand, and the Wabanaki population as many as fifty thousand, the congregation arrived in a populated and established civilization. These Europeans did not understand Natives, especially their religion. While this chapter steps outside of the themes as laid out, it is essential for understanding the impact of colonization.

The sixth chapter looks at the commitment of believers to a search for "further light," or a better understanding of God (p. 9). For instance, the "Mayflower Compact" was proposed by a group that trusted in the individual believer, leading to a Congregationalism that was a "system of participatory democracy," an idea that is an important part of Bremer's views of Plymouth (p. 97). The subsequent chapter follows the creation of Plymouth as a community and as a congregation. The

rise of lay leadership is well described in this chapter. With the 1625 death of Robinson in Leiden, the Plymouth puritans, who still thought of themselves as the Leiden congregation led by Robinson, power fell to the laity. By autumn 1621, those in Plymouth perceived that they had reached a peace with Natives, felt that their government was in shape, and finally had plentiful food. At this "first Thanksgiving," ninety Natives joined the colonists. Subsequent studies have led to a contested historiography, but Bremer's Thanksgiving was a religious occasion, "permeated with their religious faith" (p. 119); both Europeans and Native peoples had faith in their creators, for Bremer, and that shared faith contributed to the event.

Chapter 8 returns the focus to Brewster, discussing how he and his fellow believers were "open to discussing various views in household and congregational prophesying" within limits (p. 134). By rejecting a role in the pastorate, Brewster's role fit within the institutional separation of civil government and church in New England. The next chapter builds on the fourth theme, showing that Plymouth had a greater influence on the religious institutions of Massachusetts than has generally been acknowledged. By the time of John Endecott's arrival in Salem harbor, a precursor to the Great Migration, Plymouth now had surpluses that could support new arrivals. Boston leaders traveled to Plymouth in relation to the "puritan desire to maintain an institutional separation between church and state" (p. 148). Civil magistrates sought advice from church leaders but those who held church office never held state office. "While some in England and New England would dispute the value of Congregationalism, no one at the time disputed the role of Plymouth in shaping the system," Bremer writes (p. 149).

Plymouth's religious influence was established but chapter 10 makes it clear that Plymouth was not universally accepted. "There was unity but not uniformity," Bremer notes (p. 150), and

this chapter's narrative mentions Roger Williams and Ann Hutchinson, as well as the expansion of the Plymouth colony and increasingly bad relations with Natives. Even Brewster's role in religious life decreased with the arrival of new ministers. This last chapter ends with the overthrow of English bishops, which reinvigorated transatlantic debates over church structure and practices.

By the time of Brewster's death, after more than thirty-six years in a key role in the church, Congregationalism in Plymouth was under attack in New England and England. The book's conclusion mentions the rise of Presbyterian puritanism, which discredited Congregationalism by claiming that it led to radical ideas and practices in New England. English attacks on lay prophesying increased, especially as Baptists and Quakers were associated with lay preaching. Opponents of those faiths, who wanted to suppress lay preaching, created more challenges for Plymouth, especially after Brewster's death. Bremer emphasizes that, in the decades before the changing and increasingly transatlantic world of the book's conclusion, Plymouth had never been controlled by the king, a proprietor, or even investors. Indeed, the book ends by making clear that the churches of Plymouth Colony were "by and for lay believers" who governed themselves (p. 186).

This is a confidently written book, supported by Bremer's decades of "seeking to engage with the world and ideas of the men and women who settled New England" (p. 185), and on a level accessible to undergraduate students upwards. While it is focused on the story of the Plymouth congregation, and often specifically on aspects of Brewster's biography, the strength of this book is in pulling together existing knowledge with additional sources. The inclusion of the history of Native peoples provides context beyond just the First Thanksgiving. Bremer's examination of the print materials that Brewster and other Plymouth puritans owned provides an intellectual context, as well.

This book emphasizes Plymouth's role in American history, raising its relevance through its focus on the laity embodied in Brewster, a man who was better educated and had more political connections than most other puritans. The result of lay prophesying was more voices being heard, and for Bremer, created a congregation in Plymouth that was even democratic. The movement of the members of the Plymouth congregation, as well as the inclusion of books owned and written by them, firmly situates this history in its Atlantic context, a context emphasized in the book's conclusion with the introduction of Baptists and Quakers into the mix. And the impact of the Plymouth colonists on Native peoples pulls it into the larger view of American history.

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