

THE PILGRIM FATHERS AND THE MODERN WORLD

BY E. E. BRAITHWAITE



WHEN the pilgrim fathers landed on the coast of New England three hundred years ago they made a heavy dent not only upon the new world in its infinitesimal proportions of that distant day, but also upon the new world of a later development, as it grew into a vast continent embracing immense cities and thickly-populated commonwealths, with unlimited wealth of all kinds in its rivers, its lakes, its mountains and its forests.

Theodore Roosevelt went still further than this when he said at the laying of the corner-stone of the Pilgrim Memorial monument at Provincetown, Mass., in 1907: "The coming hither of the Pilgrims three centuries ago, shaped the destinies of this continent and therefore profoundly affected the destiny of the whole world".

In old England there had long been unrest in the hearts of many earnest conscientious souls who could not find that which satisfied them in the formalities of religion prevailing in their day. For decades there had been a deep undercurrent of dissatisfaction which in time came forcibly to the surface. These people were in reality searching for that which has been the goal of attainment for so many choice spirits of various periods—something which indeed is so difficult yet to be fully realized, even in our modern free civilizations—human freedom.

Their particular quest was for freedom to worship God according to the dictates of their own consciences. This seemingly moderate pursuit had far-reaching results.

To begin with, it was considered sufficiently important to receive the attention of the English Parliament. Statutes were enacted requiring all to worship God according to a definite prescribed form. The path of the would-be Independents became more rigorous than before. For breach of the law a number of them were arrested and imprisoned.

After being harassed and persecuted in various ways, these pioneers of independent thought came to realize that they could not obtain in their own land that for which they were striving. Under Elizabeth their position was sufficiently difficult, but when James ascended the throne it became still worse. He said, "I will make them conform or I will harry them out of the land or else worse." They, therefore, prepared to leave their country on a great adventure of faith.

Holland was the only country in Europe at that time that was broad enough to open its doors freely to all followers of Jesus Christ, regardless of creed or ritual, and it was to Holland that they decided to go. Other Englishmen had gone there as early as 1593 for a very similar purpose. Amsterdam was already becoming quite an asylum of liberty. To this city these refugees of 1608