

Thanksgiving Came Via Leiden

The Influence of Holland on the Pilgrim Fathers

146

[DIRK VANDENBERGHE]

It is well known that the American tradition of Thanksgiving originated with the Pilgrim Fathers. Less well-known, however, is that the inspiration for that feast came from the Dutch city of Leiden. Indeed, the Pilgrims' brief stay there was responsible for a number of Dutch influences on modern America.

Strolling through the narrow streets behind St Peter's Church in Leiden one might suddenly end up in the William Brewster alley. Similarly, in Plymouth, Massachusetts, when walking from the Pilgrim Memorial State Park to the First Parish of Plymouth, the easiest route is via Leyden Street. It is the town's oldest street where the early colonists once built their wooden houses.

These street names bear witness to an aspect of history which is increasingly being forgotten, namely that the English Pilgrims, who set sail in 1620 for the north-east coast of America in the Mayflower and established a colony there, made an important detour via the Dutch city of Leiden. Their stay lasted for scarcely twelve years, but it has exerted a strong influence on American culture right up to the present day, and not only in the feast of Thanksgiving. For, although the English Pilgrim Fathers did not leave many traces behind in Holland, they did take several Dutch customs and practices with them to the other side of the Atlantic.

Scrooby

Already by the end of the sixteenth century, English Calvinists, who were unhappy about what they regarded as the lax attitude of Queen Elizabeth and the Anglican Church towards Rome, were leaving for the Netherlands. In contrast to the Puritan reformers they were seen as separatists, who had broken completely with the Church of England. These separatists were led by the Reverend Robert Browne from Cambridge who, in fear of persecution for himself and his followers, known as Brownists, fled to Middelburg in 1578.

As pressure on the small religious community increased in England and

those who distributed anti-Anglican pamphlets risked being murdered, growing numbers fled to the more tolerant Netherlands. A community from the village of Scrooby in the county of Nottinghamshire attempted unsuccessfully to escape to Amsterdam in 1607. They were betrayed by the ship's captain and imprisoned. A year later some of them did finally make their way to the continent, though not to Amsterdam but to the somewhat quieter Leiden, then Holland's second city. A couple of months later even their imprisoned members were allowed to leave for the Netherlands, since they had been so clever as to take the precaution of disposing of all their possessions, leaving nothing for the authorities but the expense of their imprisonment. One of their leaders, William Brewster, started a small clandestine printing business and contributed to the spread of forbidden books in England. The alley where his printing shop stood is now named after him.

Brewster and his followers were of humble origin. He himself had been a postmaster and his small congregation in England had met in the post office



Charles Lucy (1814-1873),
*Departure of the Pilgrims
from Delft Haven*, oil on canvas,
England, 1847. Pilgrim
Hall Museum, Plymouth MA
(PHM) 0065, Gift of Gov.
Alexander H. Rice, 1880

to pray. Most of them were clothworkers, so for them the choice of the cloth town of Leiden was a logical move, even though it was always their intention to return to England when possible.

Leiden was then a city of 40,000 inhabitants, a third of whom were immigrants, mostly from what is now francophone Belgium. Initially the English were accepted by the local community like the other religious refugees. For the majority of them, ordinary manual workers, life was extremely hard and because of their puritan customs they tended to live apart from the other townspeople.

However, the most important of their leaders, John Robinson, regularly took part in theological debates at Leiden University. During the early years in Leiden, Robinson and Brewster had time to develop their ideas about small

Gilbert Tucker Margeson (1852-1940), *Mayflower at Sea*, oil on canvas, Massachusetts, before 1920. PHM 0038, Museum Purchase, 1920



democratically-governed religious communities. They believed in the moral purity of small groups who chose their own leaders and pastors, and they faithfully followed the precepts of the Old Testament even though this did estrange them from the world around them. Meanwhile, the English refugees were also making contact with like-minded French-speaking Calvinists, one of whom was Philip Delano who would sail on the Mayflower in 1620. This Frenchman was a distant ancestor of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, president of the USA from 1933 to 1945.

Mayflower

Life in Leiden became steadily more difficult for the English, added to which the previously so tolerant city regarded them increasingly as strange and eccentric. Furthermore, the original Pilgrims were becoming concerned that the younger generation were only too willing to adopt pernicious 'Dutch customs'. They saw their teenagers playing truant from Sunday Bible study in order to join their friends in the taverns, and choosing to follow dishonourable careers such as trading or the army. The older generation considered Leiden's youth to be a bad influence on their own offspring.

Initially they considered moving south to Zeeland, but it was Hollanders who made them aware of the possibility of emigrating to America. As well as enjoying complete freedom of faith, they would also be able to begin a completely new life. Nothing would deter them, not even the news that, on an earlier expedition from England, 150 of the 180 emigrants did not survive the dreadful voyage.

In September 1620, 35 Pilgrims left Delfshaven for Plymouth where they were joined by over 60 others from London and Southampton to board the Mayflower for America. Navigation errors and storms meant that they would never

reach their original destination, although in London it was also whispered that the captain had been bribed not to put them ashore at the Hudson River, where New York would later be built. That area was already regarded as potentially fertile land for new colonies.

Finally, in the middle of December, they landed to the north of Cape Cod, an area to which they had no claim according to the agreement they had signed with the English company that had financed their voyage in exchange for future returns. They nevertheless disembarked and named the territory 'Plymouth Colony'. Their first winter has gone into the mythology of modern America. The hard frosts made it impossible to build houses or cultivate the land and more than 50 colonists died. At one point, no more than seven men were able to work in the inhuman conditions of the American winter. The reduced colony certainly worked hard in spite of many setbacks, both in cultivating the land and in their relations with the English company, with which they finally reached an agreement which legalised their position, although the company was far from happy with the Pilgrims' emphasis on religious freedom and their failure to keep up with their payments.



Edgar Parker (1840-1892), after Robert W. Weir, *Embarcation of the Pilgrims*, oil on canvas, Boston, MA, 1875. PHM 0031, Pilgrim Society Commission, 1875

Wampanoag

The local Wampanoag Indians did not see the small settlement of whites as a threat, and it was only thanks to them that the colonists were able to survive the first winter. The Indians taught them how to cultivate local crops and showed them which waters were rich in fish. The survival of the first colonists led, over a period of years, to at least another 125 Pilgrims setting out from Leiden to America. Relations between the settlers and the local population remained good for decades and only deteriorated when the settlements became much larger and new settlers moved west in search of fresh uncultivated land. The great leader of the Pilgrims, John Robinson, died in Leiden in 1625 without ever visiting the colony. The Pilgrims who remained behind in Leiden became reconciled with the other church communities.

In the early autumn of 1621, to show their gratitude towards the Indians who had saved their lives the previous winter, the colonists presented a meal to them made of local ingredients. That event is regarded as the first Thanksgiving, which is still one of the most important festivals in modern America.

It was originally assumed that Thanksgiving went back to an English or even a heathen tradition, but later research has shown that the Pilgrims drew their inspiration for it from Leiden. After 1574, the lifting of the siege of Leiden during the Eighty Year's War was commemorated each year on 3 October and indeed is still commemorated now. In those days it was celebrated with a church service and a communal meal, elements which the Pilgrims took with them to America. Only the turkey was added, since there were so many of them living in the wild around the Plymouth Colony. Incidentally, the tradition, which became an annual celebration, was only named Thanksgiving in 1633 or 1634. It was moved, much later, to early November and became a national holiday after the Civil War, under President Abraham Lincoln. After World War 1, when Thanksgiving and the Armistice occurred in the same week, Thanksgiving was moved again, this time to the end of November. It was President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, a descendent of the Pilgrims, who decreed in 1941 that from then on Thanksgiving would be celebrated on the fourth Thursday of November.

Henry A. Bacon (1839-1912),
Landing of The Pilgrims,
oil on canvas, Boston, MA,
PHM 0047A, Unknown
source, ca. 1925



Social contract

Thanksgiving may be the most tangible, but is certainly not the only thing which the Pilgrims introduced into America. On their way to America the colonists drew up a document which they called the Mayflower Compact. They decided on this when it became clear that they would not be disembarking where they had expected, and also on the assumption that they could make up their own laws and regulations. In contrast to the other settlements, the colonists wanted to withdraw from the rule of law as laid down by the English monarchy and the Church of England. Freedom of religion and the autonomy of the small community were central and the leaders of the community would be elected by a democratic majority. Although the original document has been lost, it is regarded as the first social contract in America and as such a forerunner of the American constitution.

The Pilgrims had picked up the idea of electing local representatives in Leiden, where the inhabitants of 77 separate districts elected their representatives. The emphasis on local roots ('ask your local congressman') and the election of officials such as judges and police commissioners continue to be a feature of the American political system.

In Leiden the Pilgrims were also introduced to the civil registration of marriage, a practice which was developed further by the colonists in America. It is one of the most visible aspects of the division between church and state and has been a characteristic of the United States of America since the beginning.

Standards for newcomers

In the decades following their arrival in the Massachusetts Bay Colony, the Pilgrims were reinforced by tens of thousands of Protestants, mainly from England and to a lesser extent from Scandinavia and Germany. The hard life in New England levelled out religious differences between the various Protestant groups, though everyone continued to follow their beliefs in complete freedom. The colony soon prospered; Boston became a well-functioning port where ships were being built by the 1630s, and in 1636 the first American university was founded at Harvard.

The Pilgrim Fathers' view of themselves as the chosen people and their conviction that the religious individual should live righteously and be wary of any interference from the government became firmly rooted in American society. The sceptical attitude of many Americans - not just conservatives - towards government and the elite dates back to that time. So the first colonists laid down standards for the many newcomers from Eastern and Central Europe as well as later Catholic Irish immigrants fleeing the ravages of the potato famine in the 1840s. Furthermore, religious freedom continued to attract immigrants for centuries, from the French Huguenots to the Amish with their German roots. Sometimes defence of communities' own congregations had pernicious consequences, such as the hanging of the early Quakers until they found a safe haven in the new state of Pennsylvania. Time softened the sharper edges, but because the followers of Calvin and the Old Testament were the most successful colonists, their Protestant ideals spread out from the north-east to the

Edward Percy Moran (1862-1935), *Signing of the Compact in the Cabin of the Mayflower*, oil on canvas, New York, 1899-1901. PHM 0048, Gift of J. Ackerman Coles in memory of James Cole, 1919



south-western United States. In this way, and helped by the North's victory over the southern states in the Civil War, hundreds of Protestant churches and congregations put their stamp on the United States.

Land of the free

The decision of the Pilgrims to undertake the perilous journey to what was then an inhospitable part of the world is still regarded as a tribute to personal freedom, even though that freedom had been dedicated to the service of God. The Pilgrims saw their crossing literally as a pilgrimage to the Promised Land that God had given to them and they continued to make a daily pilgrimage, to walk with God and converse with Him.

Initially, the idea of freedom blended well with the enlightened ideals of the Founding Fathers who eventually drew up the Constitution of the United States. The Christian charity of the Protestant colonists combined with the Founding Fathers' ideal of liberty were sources of inspiration for the abolitionists who fought to put an end to slavery.

At the same time, however, many of the divisions in modern-day American politics can be traced back to differences between the enlightened Founding Fathers and the religious Pilgrim Fathers. Take for instance the fierce disagreement on the theory of evolution. To enlightened America it is a valid, well-established theory, but for many American believers it is the work of the devil which undermines the very foundations of the Bible and therefore of America itself. For if America is no longer a part of the Divine Plan, as many Americans believe, what remains of America itself? The theory of evolution is not only diabolical, it is also terribly un-American.



Jenny Brownscombe (1850-1936), *The First Thanksgiving at Plymouth*, oil on canvas, Pennsylvania or New York, 1914. PHM 0046 Gift of Emilie S. Coles, 1919

Torchbooks

Although the first colonists initially regarded themselves as progressive, their influence is now felt mainly in the strictly religious and conservative corners of society. This is not a recent phenomenon and some Americans have long been aware of it. In the 1950s and 60s the US Information Agency distributed special books on American history, such as 'The Immigrant in American History' by the well-known historian Marcus Lee Hansen, published by Harper Torchbooks. These publications contained a concluding letter to the reader. 'Overseas there is the strong impression that we are a country of extreme conservatism and that we are unable to adapt to social change. Books about America may persuade readers abroad of the opposite', wrote the director of the American Information Service, followed by an appeal for money to support the 'Books USA' campaign.

It was a remarkable phenomenon. The descendants of colonists and pioneers used these books to convince the families who had stayed behind in the Old World that they were not nearly as conservative as Europeans might think. Just after the Second World War the puritan restraint which had prevailed in American society was slowly relaxing and being replaced by the luxury culture of television sets and full refrigerators. It was precisely then, in the 1960s, that the image was created of the USA as the country of unlimited possibilities. Nevertheless, the attitude of 'God bless America' and the toleration of thousands of small, often extremely conservative, religious communities still remain - as does European incomprehension of so much seemingly extremely naive religiosity. ■

Translated by Chris Emery

FURTHER READING

Wallace Notestein, *The English People on the Eve of Colonization*, Harper & Brothers, 1954.

Marcus Lee Hansen, *The Immigrant in American History*, Harper Torchbooks, 1964.

Marcus Lee Hansen, *The Atlantic Migration*, Harper Torchbooks, 1964.