

# Congregational Profiles

Articles from the *Congregationalist*, 1958-1997

Readings in the History and Polity of the National  
Association of Congregational Christian Churches

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Rev. Dr. Arlin T. Larson, editor

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## INTRODUCTION

Of all the articles compiled for this course, those about people, these Profiles, caused the most anxiety. Who should be highlighted? For what reasons? How accurate a picture of the people of the NACCC do these particular profiles paint?

I do not pretend to have firm answers to any of these questions. It remains for qualified historians, sociologists, and others to conduct a thorough study of the NACCC, weighing the events and personalities from a more scientific perspective. These articles will, however, bring to your attention many people who have been highlighted in the pages of the *Congregationalist*. Whether there has been over the years any consistent basis of selection, I cannot say. Some of those profiled are leaders at the national level. Others are historical figures who someone (the editor him/herself?, an editor just glad to receive some material) thought worthy of notice. Many profiles are more on the order of human interest stories, exemplary instances, or “people in the news.”

What does it say about the NACCC that we honor, recognize, choose to lead us, listen to these particular people? There are certainly lessons to be gleaned by an observant reader. What conclusions do you draw?

## Congregational Profiles

# Historical Figures

## FAMOUS CONGREGATIONALISTS

Arvel M. Steece, Ph.D., Old Saybrook, Connecticut

### 1652 JOHN WISE 1725

John Wise was born in Roxbury, Massachusetts, in 1652 and died in Ipswich, Massachusetts in 1725. Samuel Danforth and John Eliot, pastor and teacher respectively of the Roxbury Church, were influences in his youth. Wise was graduated from Harvard (B.A., 1673; M.A., 1676). From 1673 through 1677 he was minister at Branford, Connecticut. Late in 1677 he began a ministry in Hatfield, Massachusetts, and served there until May, 1680, when he went to the Chebacco parish of Ipswich. In 1683 the Church was organized formally and Wise was installed in the pastorate that was to be his life time ministry.

Wise's chief claim to fame rests upon his works *The Churches Quarrel Espoused* (written 1710, published 1713), and *A Vindication of the Government of New England Churches* (1717). In 1705 the Boston Proposals and in 1708 the Saybrook Platform expressed presbyterianizing tendencies. Wise wrote to refute them, to remind the people and the Churches of their heritage of liberty, and to defend the Cambridge Platform. In the first of his works he uses satire most effectively. In the second work he depends on "sober argument and reasoned judgment".

Wise served as a chaplain with the Connecticut forces in King Phillip's War (1676) and in 1690 he was

one of the chaplains accompanying the ill-fated expedition against Quebec. In 1687 he was one of the leaders in Ipswich's contest with Governor Andros regarding "taxation without representation". Wise was jailed and later sued Dudley for denying him the privilege of *habeas corpus*. After the fall of the Andros government, Wise served in the Ipswich delegation to the General Court when the court took action against Andros and his officers.

In the smallpox epidemic Wise championed inoculation. There is no record that Wise attended the trials during the witchcraft hysteria. However, two of his former parishioners were among the accused. Wise is thought to have been the author of a petition on their behalf which he signed with a number of people from his congregation. The document shows an enlightenment uncommon at that time. Wise was also concerned that the colony develop a sound monetary policy. His life witnesses to the varied and useful careers of the New England divines who were the "Lamps of the Churches."

There is no portrait. There is a modern biography. Cook, George Allan. *John Wise, Early American Democrat*. New York, 1952.

### THOMAS HOOKER 1586(?)

Arvel H. Steece, Ph.D., Old Saybrook, Connecticut

Thomas Hooker was born in Marfield, Leicester County, England, in 1586(?) and died in Hartford, Connecticut, July 7, 1647. He was educated at Emmanuel College, Cambridge (B.A., 1608). He took orders and was rector at Esher, Surrey. Later he was lecturer at Chelmsford, Essex. Because he refused to conform he was silenced by Laud. Hooker kept a grammar school for a time and then fled to Holland. From about 1630 to 1633 he preached at Delft and Rotterdam. In 1633 he came to America where he was chosen pastor in the church at Newtown (now Cambridge).

In 1636 he removed with a major portion of the church to plant a new settlement at Hartford, Connecticut, where he remained as pastor of the First Church until his death. Hooker is known as the Father of Connecticut for his influence in formulating the constitution of the state. It is too much to claim that Hooker was a democrat in a modern sense. While he believed that the foundation of authority is "in the free consent of the people," he did not believe in the complete separation of church and state. Hooker has

been called the New England Luther. He worked for the confederation of the New England colonies.

Hooker was a strong exponent of the Congregational Way. His greatest literary work, *A Survey of the Summe of Church Discipline*, published posthumously was a defense of Congregationalism in reply to Samuel Rutherford's *Due Right of Presbyteries*. Because of his age and infirmities, Hooker did not attend the famous Cambridge Synod of 1646. However, his son-in-law, Thomas Shepard, informed him of the discussions. Hooker did not live to see the final result, for he died during the epidemic which caused the synod to adjourn in 1647. A number of Hooker's sermons were printed and witness to a keen forceful style and an energetic application of religious truth.

No portrait of Hooker exists. There is no standard modern biography. Walker, George Leon. *Thomas Hooker: Preacher, Founder, Democrat*. New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1891. Pellman, Hubert Ray. *Thomas Hooker, a Study in Puritan Ideals*. Ph.D. thesis, University of Pennsylvania, 1958.

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(The series on "Famous Congregationalists" by Dr. Arvel M. Steece closes, for the time being at least, with this article. Beginning in April we shall begin a series entitled "Those Glorious Independents" by Elizabeth Laughton Claxton of Lansing, Michigan. The first of these will be on Henry Ward Beecher. We are deeply grateful to Dr. Steece for his contributions, which we hope will be resumed at a later date. The knowledge of what great worthies of the past have done through and for free Churches should help us to take courage to do our part in the days to come. Eo.)

Arvel M. Steece, Ph.D., Old Saybrook, Conn.

## NATHANIEL EMMONS 1745-1840



*Nath. Emmons*

Nathaniel Emmons was born in East Haddam, Conn., May 1, 1745 and died in Franklin, Mass., September 23, 1840. He was educated at Yale (B.A., 1767; M.A., 1770). He studied theology with Nathan Strong of Coventry and John Smalley of New Britain, Conn. The latter stimulated him to original and independent thinking. He was licensed to preach October 3, 1769 by the South

Association of Hartford county. He was ordained April 23, 1773 and settled as pastor of the church in Franklin, Mass., where he remained in the active ministry for more than fifty-four years, retiring in May, 1827.

Emmons was a sympathetic pastor and an instructive doctrinal preacher. He always aimed "to impress the conscience as well as enlighten the understanding" of his hearers. He sought to make his theology illustrate the loveliness of God, the supremacy of God, the sovereignty of divine grace, the duty of union with God, and the duty of men to love themselves. He was the friend of liberty in political and ecclesiastical affairs. Like other Hopkinsians he spoke out against human slavery. He supported the cause of missions at home and abroad.

Emmons was a one man theological faculty. In a day when many ministers trained theological students no private instructor nurtured more men than Emmons. In the course of his ministry he guided almost a hundred men in their studies. His students continued their course from three to twenty-four months. With the establishment of theological schools his influence continued. He is credited with uniting the Old Calvinists and Hopkinsians in the establishment of Andover Theological Seminary. The first four professors of theology in the seminary at Bangor were pupils of Emmons. His pupils were also instrumental in founding the Congregational Board of Publication.

As a champion of the Congregational Way Emmons lived to see some of his fears of the Plan of Union realized. He felt that the principles of Congregationalism might be imperiled by an undue zeal for extraneous help and an improper reliance on human authority rather than on the simple truth. As the patriarch of the Mendon Association his influence was such that during his lifetime that body refrained from entangling alliances. Emmons' strong independent outlook won him the title the great American Brownist. In recent decades he has been given a place in the ranks of the forgotten heroes of American Congregationalism.

There is no modern biography. Park, Edwards A. *Memoir of Nathaniel Emmons with Sketches of His Friends and Pupils*. Boston: Congregational Board of Publication, 1861. 468 pp. Emmons. *Works* 6 vols. 1842.

Picture reproduced by John G. Towns, Holbrook, Mass.

Arvel M. Steece, Ph.D., Old Saybrook, Connecticut

## 1786—NATHANIEL WILLIAM TAYLOR—1858



Nathaniel William Taylor was born in New Milford, Connecticut, June 23, 1786 and died in New Haven, Conn., March 10, 1858. He graduated at Yale in 1807 and then spent a year in Albany, N.Y., as a private tutor. Returning to New Haven he spent four years studying under President Timothy Dwight and also served as his private secretary the first two years. He met Lyman Beecher and their lifelong friendship began.

Taylor was licensed to preach August 10, 1810. He was ordained April 8, 1812, and installed pastor of the First Church (Center Church), New Haven and served until 1822 when he was appointed a professor in the theological seminary at Yale where he taught until his retirement in 1857. His pastorate was marked by revivals in 1815, 1816, 1820, and 1821. He engaged in controversy with the Episcopalians. In company with Dwight and Beecher he sought unsuccessfully to defend the Standing Order against the demands of sectarianism and democracy.

As a seminary professor, Taylor was influential in

the modification of Calvinism and is credited with leadership in what came to be known as the "New Haven Theology". The revivalism of Dwight influenced Taylor's Old Calvinist background and he endeavored to expand the "whosoever will" of the revivalists into "a genuine theory of free agency in man" set forth in terms of moral government. During the Unitarian controversy the Taylorites posed as the champions of Calvinist orthodoxy. They were challenged by the conservatives. In 1828 Taylor presented his *Concio ad Clerum* which was intended as a defense and exposition of his viewpoint, yet occasioned further attack and put the proponents of the New Haven Theology on the defensive.

Taylor held that God demands only rational faith of rational beings. In the eyes of the conservatives this was to forsake revealed religion. Taylorism was one factor in the disruption of the Presbyterian church since many of the New School men were sympathetic to it while the Old School men held a more conservative Calvinism. His thought divided Connecticut Congregationalists into Taylorites and Tylerites and the latter founded Hartford seminary. Softening the harsher elements of Calvinism, Taylor prepared the way for the rise of "progressive orthodoxy" within Congregationalism. The standard modern biography is: Mead, Sidney Earl. *Nathaniel William Taylor 1786-1858 A Connecticut Liberal*. University of Chicago Press, 1942.

(Photo reproduced by John G. Towns, Holbrook, Mass.)

## 1783 — BENNET TYLER — 1858



Bennet Tyler

Bennet Tyler was born in Middlebury, Connecticut, July 10, 1783 and died in South Windsor, Connecticut, May 14, 1858. He was educated at Yale (B.A., 1804) and studied theology with Rev. Asahel Hooker of Goshen, Conn. He was licensed to preach by the Litchfield North Association in 1806. He was ordained June 1, 1808, in South Britain, Conn., where he had been preaching since

the autumn of 1807. The church enjoyed revivals in 1812 and 1821.

Tyler was appointed president of Dartmouth College in 1822 and received the D.D. degree from Middlebury. During his term as president he also taught divinity and preached frequently. Returning to the pastorate he served from 1828 to 1833 as minister of the Second Church in Portland, Maine, which experienced a revival in 1831. The Pastoral Union of Connecticut was organized in September of 1833 and the Theological Institute of Connecticut (now Hartford Seminary Foundation) was established. Tyler was called to be president and professor of Christian theology. He was inaugurated in May, 1834 and served the school until the infirmities of age prompted him to resign in July, 1857.

Tyler always thought of himself as a New England man in doctrinal belief and church polity yet he was of the opinion that sound New England men should cooperate with the Presbyterians. The latter did express interest and support when Tyler and the conservatives entered the lists of theological controversy with Taylor and the liberals whose "New Haven Theology" modified the older Calvinism. Tyler opposed the speculative tendencies in New England thought. The Tylerites believed all those doctrines of grace which dependence upon the absolute supremacy of God implies. Tyler sought to counteract the influence of lax notions of doctrine and Christian experience. His writings were Biblical and practical. He held moderate old school views and introduced no theological novelties.

There is no modern biography. Gale, Nabum. *A Memoir of Bennet Tyler, D.D.* . . . Boston: J. E. Tilton and Company, 1860.

(Picture reproduced by John G. Towns, Holbrook, Mass.)

Arvel M. Steece, Ph.D., Old Saybrook, Connecticut

## 1811 — CYRUS HAMLIN — 1900

Cyrus Hamlin was born in Waterford, Maine, January 5, 1811 and died in Portland, Maine, August 8, 1900. In his youth he was apprenticed as a silversmith and jeweler. The mechanical skills he acquired were later useful on the mission field. Encouraged to enter the ministry, he was released from his apprenticeship and aided to secure an education. He was graduated from Bowdoin College in 1834 and Bangor Theological Seminary in 1837. Hamlin was ordained at Payson Church, Portland, Maine, October 3, 1838 and left for Constantinople December 4, 1838 as a missionary of the ABCFM under whose auspices he served until 1860 when he was released to undertake the establishment of Robert College, serving as its president until 1877. He was acting professor of theology at Bangor from 1877 to 1880. From 1880 to 1885, he was president of Middlebury College. Thereafter he was engaged as a lecturer on missions for the American Board. He received the D.D. Bowdoin (1856) and Harvard (1860) and the LL.D. New York University (1861).

Hamlin pioneered industrial education as a means of student self-support concurrent with the academic course at Bebek Seminary. Without expense to the American Board he fitted out a workshop. A sheetmetal

## 1821 — HENRY MARTYN DEXTER — 1890

Henry Martyn Dexter was born August 13, 1821 at Plympton, Massachusetts and died November 13, 1890 at New Bedford, Massachusetts. He was graduated from Yale in 1840 and from Andover Theological Seminary in 1844. Dexter was ordained to the ministry November 6, 1844 at Manchester, New Hampshire, where he served a newly-organized church for four and one-half years. April 18, 1849 he became pastor of the Pine Street Church in Boston and continued there eighteen years. During this period he began his journalistic career and the historical researches for which he is well remembered.

In 1851 Dexter joined the editorial staff of the *Congregationalist*. From 1856 he was editor-in-chief. In 1867 he became editor and part owner of the combined *Congregationalist* and *Boston Recorder*. He resigned his pastorate and gave the rest of his life to editorial and historical work. From 1873 he resided in New Bedford. In 1858 he helped to found the (American) *Congregational Quarterly* which for two decades rendered valuable service as a scholarly journal. For all his interests in history and scholarship Dexter was no recluse. He participated actively in the ecclesiastical affairs and controversies of his time and was in demand as a preacher and lecturer. This convinced believer in Congregationalism explored its history and expounded its principles with such enthusiasm that his writing was sometimes marred by his bias. However, as a competent scholar he is generally reliable and accurate in detail. His theory concerning the authorship of the Marprelate Tracts has been superseded. Much of his writing on the Congregational ministry was made obsolete by actions of the National Council of 1886. In a charitable spirit he opposed all Presbyterianizing tendencies. He "deserves a high rank among those who are reckoned the formulators and developers of the Congregational system."

Among his many works, Dexter's most noteworthy monument is "Collections toward a Bibliography of Congregationalism" which lists 7,250 items and appears as a bibliographical appendix to *The Congregationalism of the Last Three Hundred Years, as Seen in Its Literature . . .* (1880). There is no modern biography.

oped a steam flour mill and a bakery for the Protestant Armenians. The project was so successful that during the Crimean War he supplied bread to the British hospitals at Koululce and Scutari. For the former he also erected a washing establishment or laundry facility. These ventures gave employment to many men and women. Hamlin used the profits to aid a number of Protestant congregations to erect church buildings.

Hamlin has been characterized as a man of "obstinate ingenuity." He combined spirituality and practicality. He saw many defeats transformed into victories. Robert College, an independent venture in higher education, was the realization of one of his dreams. The success of the school vindicated Hamlin's position in a conflict with the American Board regarding educational philosophy. Hamlin was more concerned with issues in a controversy than with personalities so he could disagree with a man and yet consider him a friend. He wrote widely from the time his first book *Forty Years Among the Turks* was published in 1877 until his death in 1900 when THE CONGREGATIONALIST was printing a series of his reminiscences. Hamlin, Cyrus. *My Life and Times*. Boston: The Pilgrim Press, Sixth Edition, 1924.

Arvel M. Steece, Ph.D., Old Saybrook, Connecticut  
1639 — INCREASE MATHER — 1723

Increase Mather was born in Dorchester, Massachusetts, June 21, 1639, and died in Boston, Massachusetts, August 23, 1723. He received the Harvard A.B. (1656) and the Trinity College, Dublin, M.A. (1658). While he preferred life in England and sought to establish Congregational Churches there, he refused to conform to the Restoration and was forced to return to Massachusetts.



Mather was called and settled as the teacher of the Second Church, Boston, May 27, 1664. Despite his

wide responsibilities in the service of education and the state, he gave the parish priority. From 1686 to 1701 he was President of Harvard. He encouraged the study of science, broadened the school's outlook to make it more than a seminary for ministers, and yet sought to keep it a stronghold of orthodoxy. In 1692 he received from Harvard the first D.D. conferred in British America.

Mather rendered valuable political service on behalf of the colony as an official representative in England in 1690. When William III framed a new charter, Mather was able to win concessions and preserve most of the power of the representative assembly. He was privileged to nominate the governor and all appointive officers for the first year of the new government. Upon his return home he defended the new charter and sought to educate the electorate. During the Salem witchcraft trials he did nothing to stir up the excitement. He believed that it was better for a guilty witch to escape than for an innocent person to die. In 1721 he championed inoculation for smallpox.

Essentially a conservative desirous of recapturing the zeal of the first generation Puritan colonists he would have substituted a Presbyterianized ecclesiastical plan for the democracy of the early Independents. Despite his personal preferences for an oligarchy of the devout and learned, he sought to preserve democratic institutions. Mather wrote more than one hundred books and numerous prefaces and articles marked by a simple and direct literary style. Modern secular historians are more interested in his political tracts than in his religious works.

Murdock, Kenneth B., *Increase Mather* (Cambridge, Mass., 1925) is the standard biography.

Arvel M. Steece, Ph.D., Old Saybrook, Connecticut

1853 — GEORGE A. GORDON — 1929

George Angier Gordon was born in the Parish of Oyne, Aberdeenshire, Scotland, January 2, 1853 and died in Brookline, Massachusetts, October 25, 1929. In 1871 he came to America and after working as a safe-builder, stonemason, and painter he was given the opportunity to prepare for the ministry. He was educated at Bangor Theological Seminary (1877, graduate) and Harvard (A.B. 1881). He received a number of honorary degrees. Ordained to the ministry at Temple, Maine,



June 20, 1877, he served Temple, Maine, 1877-78; Second Church, Greenwich, Connecticut, 1881-83; Old South Church, Boston, Mass., 1884-1929. He was a popular preacher at Harvard and Yale. He was Ingersoll lecturer (*Immortality and the New Theodicy*), Lyman Beecher lecturer (*Ultimate Conceptions of Faith*), and Nathaniel W. Taylor lecturer (*Religion and Miracle*). He was the preacher at the National Council in 1907.

Arvel M. Steece, Ph.D., Old Saybrook, Connecticut

1861 — WILLIAM E. BARTON — 1930

William Eleazer Barton was born in Sublette, Illinois, June 28, 1861, and died in Brooklyn, New York, December 7, 1930. He was educated at Berea College (B.S., 1885; M.S., 1888) and Oberlin Graduate School of Theology (B.D., 1890). The first of many honorary degrees given to him was the D.D. from Berea (1895).



Barton was ordained June 6, 1885 and served churches at Robbins and Helenwood, Tennessee, 1885-87; Litchfield, Ohio, 1887-90; Wellington, Ohio, 1890-93; Shawmut Church, Boston, Mass., 1893-99; First Church, Oak Park, Illinois, 1899-1924; and Collegese Church, Nashville, Tennessee, 1928-30. He helped to organize Collegese Church.

Barton was active in the life of the denomination and served as chairman of the Commission on Congregational Polity, International Council 1899, 1908, 1920. He was secretary of the Commission of Nineteen on Polity, National Council, 1910-13. He was one of the authors of the Kansas City Statement of Faith (1913) and the National Council honored him with the Moderatorship 1921-23.

As a religious journalist Barton served on the editorial staff of *Bibliotheca Sacra*. He was associated with *The Advance* 1904-12 and was editor-in-chief 1913-17. He was corresponding editor of *The Congregationalist* 1917-30.

Barton was the author of many books in several areas. He was an enthusiastic Lincoln scholar. His *Congregational Manual* (1910), *The Law of Congregational Usage* (1915), and *Congregational Creeds and Covenants* (1917) were authoritative guides for Congregationalists until recent times. In the character of *Safed the Sage* he wrote several volumes of modern parables during the last fifteen years of his life. *The Autobiography of William E. Barton with an Introduction by Bruce Barton*. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1932.

(Photo reproduced by John G. Towns, Holbrook, Mass.)

Gordon's installation at Old South was important as a witness to the variety of theological thought in American Congregationalism that came with the loss of authority in the New England Theology. The council showed that there was room for both liberals and conservatives within Congregationalism. In the course of a long and distinguished ministry Gordon became famous for his theological preaching. He is considered the third great American theologian, after Jonathan Edwards and Horace Bushnell. Gordon saw that history, philosophy and experience were necessary ingredients of a reconstructed theology. He recovered for American theology the spirit of comprehensiveness and unity. His thought was characterized by originality. He restored beauty, imagination, and feeling to theology. His work expresses a reverent rational optimism. Some of his books are: *The Witness to Immortality*, *The Christ of Today*, *The New Epoch for Faith*; *Through Man to God*, *Revelation and the Ideal*, *Aspects of the Infinite Mystery*, and *Humanism in New England Theology*.

Gordon, George A. *My Education and Religion. An Autobiography*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1925.

## Glorious Independents

Elizabeth Laughton Claxton, Lansing, Michigan

I. HENRY WARD BEECHER

Where but in an independent pulpit like that which he had established in Plymouth Church, Brooklyn, could Henry Ward Beecher have "sold" slaves in order legally to purchase their freedom from their owners? In his first sermon there, in 1847, as recorded by his son and son-in-law, he said, "I want you to understand distinctly that I will wear no fetters . . . that I will preach the gospel as I apprehend it" —\*. Probably his own experiences in Indiana with the Old School Presbytery, and also memories of the trial of his father for heresy by the Synod in the Cincinnati area prompted his determination to be free of ecclesiastical shackles.

I wonder how many Congregational ministers throughout the country operated stations of the underground railway. I know of at least twelve in Michigan. In Green Bay, Wisconsin, the Rev. Jeremiah Porter actually hid a Negro father and his three children in the belfry of the old Congregational church for the greater part of a week.

Of course, no one family did more to help free the slaves than the Beechers. Harriet has told how most of the unforgettable characters in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* were portraits of real people she had known while visiting in the South, or people described to her by one or another of her six brilliant brothers.

How fortunate it was that her brother Edward, while president of little Illinois College, was not shot with the publisher, Elijah P. Lovejoy, when he was killed by a pro-slavery mob while defending his printing press! Only the night before the murder, Edward tells us in his "Narrative of Riots in Alton," he helped Lovejoy unload the press from a river boat. As readers of this paper we should be doubly thankful, for he lived to be one of the founders, in 1849, and the first editor of, THE CONGREGATIONALIST.

\*Every Congregationalist who treasures the independent



Picture courtesy of Plymouth Church of the Pilgrims, Brooklyn

In 1860 Henry Ward Beecher introduced ten year old slave girl "Pinky" to his congregation in the Plymouth Church of the Pilgrims, Brooklyn, N. Y. That Sunday \$1,000.00 was raised to buy her freedom and in 1928, as Mrs. James Hunt, "Pinky" returned to retell her story from the same pulpit.

spirit should read SAINTS, SINNERS AND BEECHERS by Lyman Beecher Stowe, a book published by Bobbs-Merrill in 1934, from which much of the above information was gleaned.



Age 23

Henry Ward  
Beecher



Age 30

## “Emperor of American Preachers”

*Editor's Note: 1987 marks the 100th anniversary of the death of Henry Ward Beecher.*

by the Rev. Harry R. Butman

Congregationalism has long been noted for its great preachers. In colonial days there were such men as Jonathan Edwards—*Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*—and Jonathan Mayhew—*The Morning*

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*Star of the Revolution.* And in 1923, the old *Literary Digest* poll to ascertain the 25 greatest preachers in America revealed that our relatively small denomination had 7 out of the 25.

But it can reasonably be claimed that no preacher in the entire history of this country ever held the place of supremacy occupied by Henry Ward Beecher, for 40 years the minister of Plymouth Congregational Church in Brooklyn. One might call him King Henry, but that would hardly be accolade enough. “Pope” would be the proper term for ecclesiastical lordship, but no Congregationalist could ever be that. Henry Ward Beecher was the emperor of American preachers.

Henry Ward Beecher's family was an astonishing clan: they

went everywhere, did great things, and wrote and spoke incredibly. According to Theodore Parker, Lyman Beecher, their patriarch and progenitor, was “the father of more brains than any man in America.” Lyman Beecher was a small man physically, but he was strong and durable. Once, at the age of 81, being late for a meeting, he put his hand to the top of a five-barred gate and nimbly vaulted over it. A man of personal charm and a measure of fanaticism, he hated both Unitarianism and Demon Rum, and fought them with flaming passion. He was a High Calvinist—one whose test of orthodoxy was a willingness to be damned for the glory of God.

On two women he begot 13 children. Two died in infancy, and

two were unnaturally cut off. Of the other nine, seven became nationally famous figures. Henry and Harriet Beecher Stowe (*Uncle Tom's Cabin*) were the giants. But Catherine was a pioneer in the emancipation of women, and Edward, the brave scholar who faced death with martyred Abolitionist Elijah Lovejoy, was one of the founders of *The Congregationalist*. Thomas K. was a truly modern minister, a close friend of Mark Twain, and Isabella was a brilliant early "woman's libber." Charles was an excellent musician who survived a Massachusetts heresy trial and died at a good old age. The early children who did not gain fame were George, who died young, and Mary, that rare person, a private Beecher who published not a word. William K., founding minister of our National Association Church at Toledo, and James Chapin, who died by his own hand, were the losers, the dark stars of that glittering galaxy, the clan Beecher. All the seven sons were ministers.

Henry is the most complex and controversial of all the controversial and complex Beechers. He is simply too big and intricate a personality to fit into the compass of a magazine article; no fewer than 26 books have been written about him. Henry's part in the Beecher-Tilton affair; the two great councils held in relation to Plymouth Church and the scandal; Henry as churchman, preacher, and pastor; Henry as national and international figure, would be a quartet of treatments which would merely sketch the outlines of the portrait of the man. He undoubtedly held the most prominent place that a Congregational minister, or ecclesiast of any faith, for that matter, has held in the three-and-a-half centuries plus since the landing of the Pilgrims. Henry was a lion: huge of frame, stately of appearance, possessed of a voice that could roar and purr, and with a power of personality that jackals could only worry, not kill.

Henry had a short pastorate at Lawrenceburg, Kansas, during which he had taken the church out

of the Presbytery and made it independent. He then went to Indianapolis, and after a successful pastorate was called to be the minister of the newly formed Plymouth Church in Brooklyn, NY. A group of laymen from Broadway Tabernacle in New York City had bought the Cranberry Street edifice of a Presbyterian Church which was relocating. These men got Henry because they wanted a preacher who could fill the big building and make the church financially profitable. Henry was installed November 11, 1847. The church and he rose high and swept meteorically across the denominational skies of America. It soon became "The Church," not only of New York and Congregationalism, but of all Protestant America.



Age 40

*"Big, virile, exuding that strange magnetism we now call charisma."*

By any standard, Plymouth was a great church. Theirs was an exceedingly ugly building, but it was always jammed. Early Sunday mornings, the Brooklyn ferries were crowded with people coming over from New York City to hear Henry preach. Often there were no seats left half an hour before the service began. Henry was not the only great speaker to make the walls ring with eloquence—William Lloyd Garrison, Wendell Phillips, and Charles Sumner were powerful voices raised against slavery. Adelina Patti, famed soprano, Ole Bull, Norway's greatest violinist, and Theodore Thomas, the first major conductor in American orchestral history, all made music at Plymouth. Charles Dickens gave readings there; Grant and Lincoln attended services; all in all, it was the nation's most famous house of worship.

And it was Henry himself who made it so. Since he rode out of the West, an eloquent young man of 34, his career had been ever upward. The Church was not only large—some 2500 members—but immensely wealthy, and the men and women who made up its membership were able and powerful. Plymouth Church was strong enough so that Abraham Lincoln, unwilling to give offense to a Plymouth member, once in a desperately busy time, made an appointment for an officious Plymouth woman who wanted to lecture him. By 1855, Henry, in addition to preaching, was giving 50 public lectures a year, and after that a hundred or more a year until his death in 1887. When he stood behind his table (he did not use a pulpit), big, virile, exuding that strange magnetism we now call charisma, and when his organ-like voice made peals of rich, spontaneous eloquence, he was simply unmatchable.

Henry's powerful, wealthy, and innovative church was indeed paradisaic. But from the beginning snakes have inhabited Eden, and Henry became the focus of the biggest and most tangled alienation of affection suit ever spread over the years and over the pages, not only

of the American press, but of the English and European press as well. One of the many volumes based on the famous Beecher-Tilton case was a gossipy book, *The Romance of Plymouth Church*, a 566-page piece of scandal-mongering which dealt sensationally with the relationship between Henry and Elizabeth Tilton, pretty young wife of Theodore Tilton, handsome blond giant, poet, editor, co-worker with Henry, and a member of Plymouth Church.

It is impossible to discuss the matter in detail. Literally hundreds of thousands of pages of newspaper stories, legal testimony, council findings, and books were written about the case.\* For a long time an affair had been suspected, but it was not until the Fall of 1870 that Theodore made public a letter by his wife. It read, in part, "Yesterday afternoon my friend and pastor HENRY WARD BEECHER, solicited me to become his wife in all the relations that term implies." Later, Theodore was mercilessly specific: He publically charged that Henry had ". . . won the affectionate love of Mrs. Tilton (and) accomplished possession of her person; maintaining with her henceforward the relation called criminal intercourse."

This sounds open and shut. But on December 30, 1870, Henry asked for and got Theodore's permission to visit Libby and received a letter which said, among much else, "I desire to say explicitly, Mr. Beecher has never offered any improper solicitation, but has always treated me in a manner becoming a Christian and a gentleman."

I came to the study of this affair with a vague conviction that Henry was guilty, but a careful study of the data has changed my mind. Lyman Abbott, who edited the "Uncontradicted Evidence"—a 64-page condensation of the legal trial—concluded, "It is well known that they (the sensational details) imply an admission of some fault on Mr. Beecher's part, and that they do not contain any words clearly describing that fault." I agree with Lyman Abbott. My personal opinion is that Henry, in the modern

idiom, "made a pass" at Libby Tilton but did not commit adultery with her. If this sounds like whitewashing, be it remembered that Plymouth Church voted Henry innocent, a court of law acquitted him, and two great ecclesiastical councils did not convict him of sexual impropriety.

I wish I had the space to tell of these councils. I was fascinated by their letters missive proceedings, and results. The first council held in Brooklyn in 1874, had delegates from 119 churches. The second, called in 1876, was the biggest thing of its kind in our history. It lasted five days, and 250 delegates and ministers from 175 churches in 18 states meticulously examined the Beecher case without ever mentioning the scandal directly. Together the councils produced 641 pages of fine-spun filigreed discussion of the basic principles of autonomy and fellowship—the words of yesterday's giants of our Way whose names still echo today.

But I must end with a final word about Henry the Lion; Henry Ward Beecher was one of a kind. After he was made, the mold was broken. He defies complete analysis. He was a diamond, but a flawed diamond, yet of such sheer size and brilliance that he was beyond price. Under the glitter and showmanship, the flamboyant oratory, the evasion of issues, there was a coping strength. Even the savagery engendered by the great scandal, an attack which would have utterly destroyed a lesser man, did not destroy him. He survived; he survived magnificently. After the rage of the trials he went on to do some of his best work, his *Life of Christ* being an example. He held the respect of many of the great of our fellowship and the loyalty of his congregation; he kept his famous pulpit. He died in a full age in 1887, and was gathered to his fathers with more honor than most unmarred men know: his name still lives. ■

\* This material is outlined in "The Beecher Lectures," by the Rev. Harry Butman, published by the Congregational Foundation for Theological Studies in 1978.



Age 50

*"He was a diamond, but a flawed diamond, yet of such sheer size and brilliance that he was beyond price."*



Age 65

# WILLIAM BREWSTER

## MAN WITH IDEAS

Eleanor O. Miller

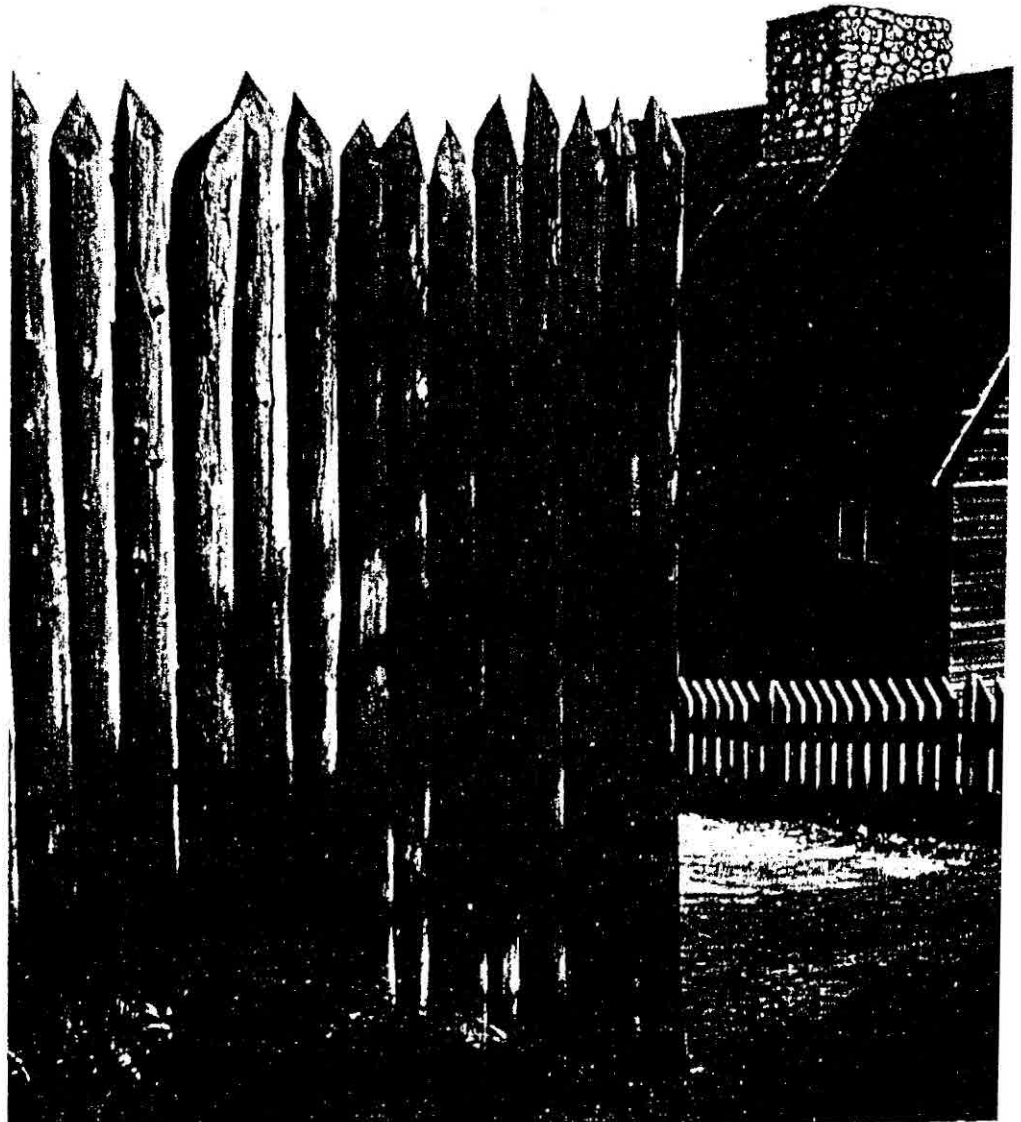
Young William jogged along on horseback over the muddy trail called The Great North Road, on the way to his first year in college. When he arrived at the ancient city of Cambridge, the thrilling sight of the towers and spires of the University town may have made him forget his weariness.

On December 3, 1580, William Brewster entered his name on the roll of Peterhouse College.

Peterhouse, the oldest college of Cambridge, was founded in 1257, next to the church of St. Peter. The central part of the building, with its original rooms,

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was never torn down, and remains as the "oldest college building now in use."

Brewster, with his hundred classmates, studied Rhetoric and Logic and Philosophy, perhaps Astronomy and Greek. The Greek, however, was regarded as something "dangerously new." Lectures were in Latin; adequate facility with that language was a basic entrance requirement. In some unknown way, William had learned his Lyly's *Latin Grammar* in his small home village of Scrooby.

The boys got up for a one hour morning service at five, and then studied until ten or eleven when they dined in the hall on beef or mutton or veal, with fish

on Fridays. Usually a passage of Scripture was read during the meal. After evening prayers and supper about five, they were "their own masters, with restrictions," for the rest of the day.

The restrictions were numerous; no students could go to taverns or dances or bathe in the river Cam. They were prohibited from playing with dice, and could play cards "only during the twelve days after Christmas." There were no University sports, although archery was encouraged.

The Master of Peterhouse during Brewster's residence was Andrew Perne, known as a "tolerant spirit," who "made it possible for the college to be the meeting ground of representatives of every School of Religious Thought . . ."

The ideas of such men were probably more important to young William than what he learned in classes or through his own study. And he had a chance to think over those ideas. Even today, the stated purpose of Cambridge is to give man time to think.

The ideas that William heard were revolutionary in an era of confusion and contention, with irreconcilable philosophies. Many of the ideas were expressed in religion, but they had political implications as well, and were even related to social and economic affairs. They threatened change in the lives of common people, as well as those at court; they were concerned with personal "rights" and individual conscience in a country and era when religion and government were one, and both a matter of strict state control.

One of the radical ideas of the early 1580's was that individuals should be free to withdraw from the established church if, within that church, they could not worship as they chose. They could even secede, or separate, as a group and set up a church of their own. Brewster claimed that he acquired his first such separatist ideas at Cambridge.

William Brewster left Cambridge after two years and went to London. He was only a year or two younger than Shakespeare, and the London experience in Elizabethan England, as described by that master writer, must have also been revealed to the humbler Brewster, perhaps in different ways. The great contrasts between people of various kinds, at Court and in the streets, seem not to have disturbed Brewster's belief in the ordinary people, a belief he apparently kept all his life, wherever he went.

In a few years, Brewster went back to Scrooby, the village he had left less than a decade before. It must have been a very quiet life in Scrooby after the turmoil of London and the excitement of Cambridge, but the quiet continued for only a short time after young William arrived.

The reform movement in the church, usually designated as Puritanism, was growing stronger, and opposition to it from the bishops was becoming more violent. Tracts and pamphlets in defense as well as opposition appeared frequently.

William Brewster probably read such tracts as they



