

The talk was presented by Martyn Whittock, historian and specialist in 17th century radical religion and theology, and author of *Mayflower Lives: Building a New Jerusalem in the New World* (2019). The book talks about the problems of persecution for radical protestants under the English Reformation from Edward VI onwards, which increased particularly in the later years of Elizabeth I's reign and under James I. This led to groups such as Separatists (who believed in direct worship without church or priest) leaving to seek refuge in other lands, firstly in around 1608 to the Netherlands where they formed a community in the town of Leiden, and later deciding to cross the Atlantic to the New World.

Embarkation of the Pilgrims (detail)
William Walter Weir 1843.

By 1620 the situation in Leiden was becoming less secure due to the threat of war with Spain, and along with other groups from East Anglia the Separatists sought funds from the Merchant Adventurers in London. With backing from merchant Thomas Weston they formed a joint-stock agreement and obtained a grant and licence



to form a colony near the mouth of Hudson River. The group were joined by other potential settlers (whom they called Strangers) and the ship *Mayflower* was chartered in Rotherhithe, while the Leiden Separatists bought a smaller vessel, *Speedwell*. They agreed to rendezvous in Southampton in July 1620 to buy provisions for their voyage and for the new settlement, but their stay was prolonged for repairs to be made to the leaking *Speedwell*. After two further stops for repairs *Speedwell* was abandoned in Plymouth, Devon and some of her passengers transferred to *Mayflower*, which finally set sail in September with 102 persons, leaving some eighteen to follow later.



Mayflower in Plymouth Harbor
by William Formby Halsall 1882.

Mayflower was a merchant ship designed to carry goods rather than passengers, so life on board would have been uncomfortable with little privacy. Leaving so late in the year meant they encountered storms and severe weather. They endured many hardships: a man was swept overboard (but rescued), and two men died during the voyage while a

baby boy was born, but by the end of the voyage other passengers were sick and most in poor health. They first sighted land at Cape Cod but were unable to land; this was further north than planned but strong winds prevented them sailing south. They finally made

landfall on 9th November near Cape Cod, in the wrong place: a spot already occupied by Native American Wampanoag people.

By then it was winter and the settlers weren't able to leave the ship until their shelters on land were built which took several weeks, and during their reconnaissance forays they encountered members of the Wampanoag peoples. This coast dwelling tribe had suffered severe losses from disease brought by previous visitors from Europe, and they were also under attack by hostile tribes of their own people. They saw the new arrivals as allies as they had tools and weapons which were superior to those they could make, and the settlers were in a weak state and would very likely die without the Wampanoags' help: as it was, they lost half their number during their first year in the New World. Soon after arrival all the male passengers signed the *Mayflower Compact* (November 21 1621), setting out the basis on which they were to live together, respecting each other's beliefs and allowing equality for all. The settlers began to spend more time ashore from January 1621, and Mayflower sailed for home in April 1621 with a much-reduced crew and no cargo, to the disappointment of their financial backers. Plymouth Colony became established and in later years the story was written down by William Bradford, governor between 1622 and 1656, in the manuscript "*Of Plymouth Plantation*".

The early settlers saw themselves as English and their religious ideology defined the identity of their settlement, which became important as the 'foundation ethos' of the United States of America, where many more groups followed later in the 17th century. By 1700 more than 350,000 migrants had settled in the 'English' settlement areas on the east coast from Maine to the Caribbean; and by then African slaves had been introduced to all those areas – many in Virginia and the Caribbean, but smaller numbers in New England. Increasing tension arose between the settlers and Native Americans, the 'Indian Wars' culminating in King Philip's War from 1775-78, resulting in the highest mortality of all wars in America. This was catastrophic for the natives, whose attitude to property differed from that of the settlers, who were constantly reinforced with recruits from home. By 1700 also the period of religious independence ended after non-Puritans became enfranchised, and 'Puritans' are viewed more positively by Americans, who see this as part of their 'exceptionalism': as in "God brought us here and gave us this land", which is important to their national identity. Martyn Whittock had referred to the Pilgrim Fathers as 'asylum seekers', and in answer to a question he explained that the group were a mixed party of outsiders, seeking to escape from their lives in the 'Old World' by migrating to a 'new world', so it is quite ironic that they are seen as the founders of American nationalism.

Another question was asked about the origin of Thanksgiving, the celebration now held on the last Thursday of November (as instituted by President Abraham Lincoln): the Pilgrims wouldn't recognise this and may have called it simply 'Harvest'. In 1621 the occasion was shared with the Wampanoag people who would often turn up to events involving food, and would contribute meat from their hunting expeditions. However later the colonists would use biblical Old Testament texts (rather than Christian beliefs) to allow for slavery and the persecution of Native Americans: as 'God's chosen people' they believed they entered a 'new wilderness' where they would be justified in smiting the (heathen) 'Malachites'. This was a most stimulating and thought-provoking lecture which left many of us wishing to know more: Martyn's book is available in bookshops now, and will be issued in paperback early in 2021. I hope to include a review in the SAS newsletter later this year.