

THE PRESENT RECOVERS THE PAST

America's past is not dead. It lives in each of us, challenging our imagination, helping to mold our ideals.

Stephen Vincent Benét, poet and story writer, died during World War II. At his death in 1943, he was only in his mid-forties, but already he had made his mark on modern American literature. All his life Benét had been fascinated by America's unique heritage, and much of what he wrote re-created that heritage and the people who shaped it. Throughout his long poem *John Brown's Body*, he made the Civil War blaze vividly again, with all its grief and heroism. His story "The Man from Fort Necessity" breathed life into George Washington, so that the Father of Our Country — no longer a portrait or a statue — was revealed as a man who had felt the snow's cold and slept out at night under stars. In "The Devil and Daniel Webster" (page 280), Benét took a great American orator from the textbooks and made his voice roar once more through the hills of New Hampshire.

At the time of his death, Stephen Vincent Benét was working on another long poem. Published posthumously, it was called *Western Star*, and, like *John Brown's Body*, it won a Pulitzer Prize. Here is a part of that poem. The poet, you will find, is able to revive the past convincingly because he never forgets that people lived then — not simply ancestors, not statistics or populations, not monuments or occasions for holidays, but people, no less real than people alive today.

In the House of the Wild Wood

STEPHEN VINCENT BENÉT

Let us count them now, the beginnings of New England.
There were thirty-eight grown men,
From Brewster and Carver, both of them in their fifties,
To young John Alden and the other bachelors,
Eighteen married women, three of them with child, 5
Twenty boys, eleven girls
(And seven of these were parish waifs from London
Or seem to have been and no one knows why they came,
But five of the seven died ere they were grown),
Nine servants, five men hired for various tasks, 10
Including two sailors who would stay but a year,
A spaniel dog and a great mastiff bitch.

"In the House of the Wild Wood," from *Western Star* by Stephen Vincent Benét. Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc. Copyright, 1943, by Rosemary Carr Benét. Reprinted by permission of Brandt & Brandt.

IN THE HOUSE OF THE WILD WOOD

And that is the roll. You could write the whole roll down
On a single sheet of paper, yes, even the dogs.
— And, when you have written them down, you write New England. 15

So think of them through the sixty-five long days
Of tempest and fair weather, of calm and storm.
They were not yet Pilgrim Fathers in steeple-hats,
Each with an iron jaw and a musketoon.*
They were not Pilgrim Mothers, sure of their fame. 20
They were men and women and children, cramped in a ship,
Bound for an unknown land and wondering.
The godly prayed, the ungodly spat overside,
The sailors jeered now and then at the pious speeches,
The Billington boys behaved like limbs of Satan, 25
And the three pregnant women walked the decks
Or lay in their cabins, wondering at night
What hour their pains would strike and what would be born.
In fact, there were human beings aboard the *Mayflower*,
Not merely ancestors.

And yet there is 30
An unforced, almost childish sweetness about the whole
— The sweetness they could muster with their rigor,
The honey of the iron, the naïve
Devoted, confident wonder that made them pilgrims.
Were they sick? They staggered up to the decks and the air 35
And so felt better. Did the tempest break
And the ship's planks strain and leak? They braced the main beam
With an iron jackscrew they'd brought, and all was well.
They might long for the bliss of God and groan at His judgments,
But they brought with them butter and pease* and beer 40
And the scurvy did not strike and the voyage was healthy.
Only one boy died, a servant of Doctor Fuller's,
While the crew lost four or five, and one most profane,
So God must be with them — God must be with them here,
On the sea as on the land, ever-present God, 45
With His great right hand outstretched like the Winter cloud.
And Elizabeth Hopkins labored and bore her child,
(*The cries in the narrow cabin, the women waiting*)
And they named the son Oceanus* and rejoiced
For that was surely a sign of God's mercies, too, 50
A fine, strong boy and the mother alive and well.
And Susanna White and Mary Allerton
Knew their time was still to come,
And wondered, seeing the child, when it would be.

19. musketoon: large musket. 40. pease: peas 49. Oceanus (ō-sē'a-nas): in Greek mythology, the god of the outer sea circling the earth.

AMERICA'S BEGINNINGS

And so, at last, on the nineteenth of November, 55
On a clear, crisp morning, at daybreak,
With a slice of old moon still bright in the dawn-sky,
They saw the long dim outline of Cape Cod.

Then Christopher Jones tacked ship* and made for the southward,
For they thought to settle, perhaps, where the Hudson flowed, 60
If they might reach it, at least in a milder clime,
But they got among white water and tangled shoals,
They got in the broken part of Pollack's Rip,
Where the currents run like a millrace* and veer and change,
The bitter water, 65
The graveyard of ships to come.

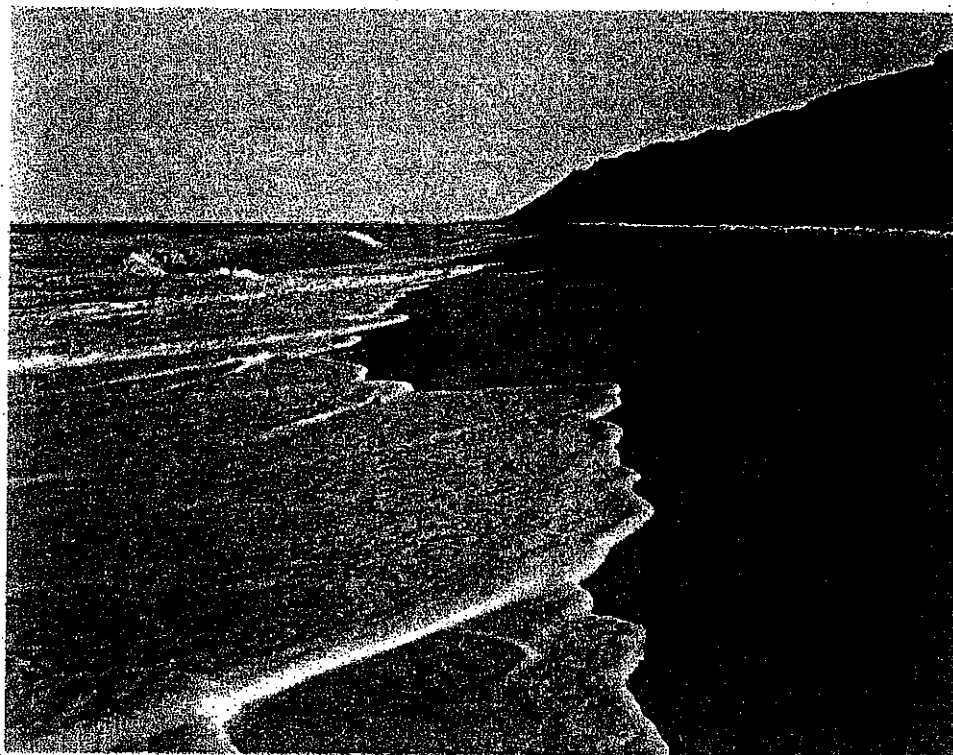
They knew that they were in danger from the grim
Faces of crew and captain — but they were landmen.
There were roaring waters. That was all that they knew.
But Christopher Jones and his sailors knew the truth 70
And he must have wiped his brow when at last, toward evening,
He worked the clumsy *Mayflower* into deep water,
Hove to* for the night and knew he'd not lost his ship.
He had not done badly, Captain Christopher Jones,
Though you'll find no statue of him in Plymouth Harbor 75
And to him, no doubt, 'twas a day's work and no more.

And next day, they looked at the land, and it was good,
A fair land, wooded to the brink of the sea,
Washed with blue, biting air and brave in the sun,
A land for God's plantation.

And suddenly 80
They were sick of the ship and the ship's smells and the sea.
They had come so far. They were within sight of land,
Not where they had planned — but land — and the look of it!
Earth after long waters, solid peace in the hand.
They were ready for harbor, now.

And the sixty-seventh 85
Day out of England, they let go anchor at last
In Provincetown Harbor, just inside Long Point,
And their firewood was spent and they sent a party ashore,
And there, not on Plymouth Rock, was the first landing.
They searched. They found neither person nor habitation. 90
But the wood they cut for their fire was juniper
And it smelt very sweet and strong.
Look, if you choose, at the large iced wedding-cake

59. tacked ship: changed course 64. millrace: canal which carries water rapidly to a mill wheel. 73. Hove to: pointed the boat directly into the wind so that she would remain motionless.



A beach on Cape Cod, near Provincetown.

We have built,* at great expense, over Plymouth Rock
 (Or over a rock that happened to be at Plymouth)
 Look at it well, and buy your souvenirs.
 But it does not tell the story.

95

It does not tell

The silent emptiness of the Winter land,
 The smell of the juniper — and the breathless wonder
 As they splashed ashore for their First Discovery,
 For they couldn't wait for the shallop* to be mended.
 How could they wait? It was dangerous, of course.
 But Captain Standish led them — and you can see them,
 The sixteen breathless men,

100

The staid husbands, the sober fathers of families,
 Who had been woolcarders and printers, hosiers and tailors,
 With sword and musket and corselet,* warily treading
 The new, wild shore, where there might be anything.
 And, sure enough, they were hardly well on their way
 When they saw five red men — and was it five or six?
 They were not quite sure — but there were men and a dog —
 You couldn't imagine a dog, but he was there.
 They all ran away the moment they were seen,
 Swift naked figures, their dog pelting after them,

105

110

94. We have built: An ornate monument has been erected over the rock on which the Pilgrims are supposed to have landed at Plymouth. 101. shallop: light, open boat. 107. corselet: body armor.

AMERICA'S BEGINNINGS

And the English gave pursuit but could not catch up,
But they had seen Indians. 115

And a little later
They came to a flowing spring, "and we sat us down
And drank our first New England water
With as much delight as ever we drank drink."
Wonderful, to drink water in a new land! 120
To taste the bright, nipping air!
They were bolder now. They went on. They would not be stayed.
They found where a house had been, found a ship's kettle,
Found a heap of sand, smoothed over by Somebody,
And dug in the sand, of course.

And there they found 125
A little old basket full of Indian corn,
Real grains of corn, you could hold them in your hand.
They dug farther — and, oh, there was a fine, great, new basket!
With thirty-six ears in it, yellow and blue and red,
And they looked at the ears and passed the ears around. 130
(And the corn was to help to save them from starvation,
But they did not think of that then. They were busy digging.
Have you ever dug in the earth and found something hidden?
Penny or corn or pearl, it is all the same.
It is treasure-trove, it is the gift of the ground.) 135
And, after all of them had looked at the ears,
They wondered what to do with the things they'd found.

But they took them along, of course. One always does.
You will carry a stone ten miles, if you've found it so,
And tell everyone about it, once you are home. 140

And that night it rained. But they camped by a great fire.
(In Somebody's house — in the house of the wild wood.)
They were safe to be sure. They had set up a palisade.
They had their muskets.

And a Sioux war-party
Could and would have quietly cut their throats. 145
In spite of sleepy sentry or barricade
Ere the morning came.

But, landing the year they did,
They were ten times more fortunate than they knew
For, the year before, there had been a plague in the land
And the tribes who might have slain them were dead or broken 150
Except for a scattered few.

And, at dawn, next day,
Having slept all night, yea, verily, on the ground,
(And for some, no doubt, the first time they had ever slept so)

These men of streets and children and settled ways
 Went wandering again through Somebody's house 155
 With the pure excitement of boys at their first camp,
 For Somebody had been there but wasn't home,
 Though they found his traces — two canoas* of his
 (You wouldn't have thought they were canoas at first,
 But they were, for we looked them over) 160
 And a bent-down tree with something queer at the end,
 A noose, made of sinew, aye, and cleverly, too.
 Somebody had been there.
 They gathered around it, staring, pleased to the bone.
 'Tis a deer-trap. Aye. Dost not think so, Neighbor Hopkins? 165
 Aye, a deer-trap. Truly! See! And it worketh so!
 And William Bradford boldly investigated
 And caught himself in it neatly by the leg
 And they all agreed 'twas a very pretty* device.
 A very pretty device for Somebody. 170
 They couldn't leave it. They had to bring it along.
 It wouldn't be any use, but they had to bring it.
 And when they got back to the ship and their wives greeted them,
 Heard about all the things that they had to tell
 And were shown the corn and the baskets and the deer-trap, 175
 They had the pride of all hunters, from Nimrod* on.

Humility Lanyard saw them, coming home,
 The small, black, distant figures, walking the beach,
 And the women dropped their washing and counted quickly,
 Counted with the quick dread. 180
 But there were sixteen. It was well. God had spared them all.
 — The first of all the endless waitings and countings,
 The long, sick waiting, the count of the frontier,
 When your eyes try so hard to see what is far and small
 And you tell the children, "Yes — it's all right — it's Father." 185
 But you do not look at the children but at the far
 Specks in the boat, by the forest's edge, on the hill,
 And why does that one walk lame — and that one carry
 Something upon his back — fourteen — fifteen —
 But I cannot see him — I cannot see him yet — 190
 Yes — he waves his hand.
 Till at last you know by the look of the men's shoulders,
 Even far away, whether it is good news or bad,
 And can make your face as it should be when they come.
 For you must not show the fear. It is bad for them 195
 To have their women show fear.

158. canoas: canoes. 169. pretty: clever. 176. Nimrod: described in Genesis X: 8-10 as a mighty hunter.

AMERICA'S BEGINNINGS

Humility was not to feel that yet
 But Katharine Lanyard felt it — and trampled it
 Like a weakness under her feet, as she caught her breath
 And stared for Matthew — and yes — he was safe — he was there. 200
 "I can see Father," said the boy Elias,
 In his clear little nervous voice. "Has he killed Indians?
 Frankie Billington says his father will kill them all.
 But Frankie's a wicked boy —"

Then there was a queer
 Wail of greeting, like a sea-gull's cry, 205
 From the waiting women, the cry they could not keep down,
 Not at this first, not now.

The men shouted back,
 Clearly and strongly, the hunters coming home.
 And —
 "Father looks bigger," thought Humility,
 "He looks different, there, with his musket. I don't know why." 210

Somebody's house but Somebody wasn't home —
 And the women washed and Susanna White bore her child
 And they named the child Peregrine, a wanderer.
 And the days slipped 215
 Toward Winter while they explored the river-valleys,
 Shot geese and ducks, found two round Indian houses
 With tools and baskets, deers' feet and eagle-claws
 Lying about in them, but no living thing.
 — Somebody's house but Somebody had gone —
 Found a grave and dug it up, and in the grave 220
 They found the skull of a man with yellow hair,
 Bound up in a canvas cloth.
 A packneedle and a knife had been buried with him
 And near him were the bones of an Indian child.
 And they looked at the skull of the sailor, the English skull, 225
 The skull of the unknown man who had come before,
 And thought such thoughts as they might.
 Now they all had coughs and colds and the weather hardened.
 The face of the land was a weather-beaten face.
 They must find their refuge and plant. 230
 And, while they were absent on this discovery,
 Young Frankie Billington got hold of a musket
 And shot it off, as he would, in the great cabin,
 Just missing a little barrel of gunpowder
 That might have blown him to bits and stayed* the ship. 235
 It doesn't say what they did to Frankie Billington
 But I'd like to have heard the remarks of Captain Jones.

235. stayed: broke in the sides of.

And then, at last, they met Somebody.

It was cold

And the water froze on their heavy clothes like iron,
Wading from boat to shore.

240

And there was Somebody — ten or twelve of him,
Busy about a black thing on the beach,
But he ran away again as soon as they saw him,
And the black thing was but a dead grampus,* after all.
That day they wandered the woods and saw no people
But, when night began to fall, they hasted away,
For the dark woods changed and moved with the evening shadows,
Changed, and drew in about them. They weren't afraid
But they were glad to reach the shallop again.

245

And the men they had left in it rejoiced to see them —
Oh, the vast and echoing Winter woods, the strange
Army of shadows that flit and change with the dusk
And the queer cries in the night — are they owls or men?

250

And next morning, just at dawn,
They were up betimes,* the little exploring party,
Some in the shallop, most of them on shore
Breakfasting, and the arms laid down on the beach
Where they would be less trouble to put aboard.
Then they heard the same strange cry they had heard at night.
The man who was furthest away came running and yelling,
"They are men! Indians! Indians!"
And after him, arrows flickered.

255

There was a confused

And crowded moment as they ran for their arms.
Miles Standish had his snaphance* with him and fired it.
But the heavy muskets took years to load and prime.
They yelled to the men in the shallop to be on guard
And the men answered, "Well, well" and "Be of good courage!"
While three of their pieces went off at Somebody's woods
And they heard the shaking Indian yell go up,
"Woath, Woach! Ha! Hach! Woach! Woath!"
And there was Somebody. There he was at last,
A valiant fellow, red as the autumn leaf,
With bow and arrow, He shot three arrows at them
And they stooped and let the arrows pass over their heads,
But their coats on the palisade were stuck with arrows
And Somebody's chief stood three round shots of a musket,
Till, at last, one valiant Pilgrim aimed straight at him
And saw the splinters fly from Somebody's tree,
And, with that, He gave an extraordinary shriek
And away went they all!

265

270

275

244. grampus: blackfish. 255. betimes: early. 264. snaphance: flint lock musket.

They followed a quarter mile.
Somebody had dissolved in the woods like mist.
But they gave two loud shouts, all the same, and fired a volley,
Just to show Somebody.

280

And that was that,
And nobody had been hurt on either side
But they found eighteen arrows, and they were sure
There must have been more.

285

And that was the last they saw
For a long time of bewildered Somebody,
Who, if we know ought,* was quite as confused as they
Over the whole proceeding.

So they went on
In the shallop, through a vile day of snow and rain,
Where first the rudder broke and then the mast,
But they found Clarke's Island and rested there for the night,
And, though they were wet and miserable and cold,
I can hear them talking that night about the wild
Encounter with Somebody, and looking gravely
At the arrows tipped with deer-horn and eagle-claws.
They had fought Indians! And they were still alive.
Next day being Sabbath, they rested and caught their breath,
But the next day, they came to Plymouth and found it good,
A wide, fair bay, with cornfields and brooks inland,
A fitting place for Zion.*

290

295

300

So they decided
And went back to tell the news. But, when they returned,
The women looked strange.

There had been a tragedy
And Bradford's young wife, Dorothy, was dead,
Drowned in the harbor waters.

We shall not know
How it happened or why it happened or what it was,
Chance, loneliness or fate,
That drew her over the side of the *Mayflower*
Into the freezing water, but so she died.

305

And William Bradford the farm-boy, the self-taught scholar,
Versed in Hebrew and Greek and the hearts of men,
(For he was to rule the colony many years)
Though he writes of other things, writes nothing of this.
For some things cannot be written. Not with a pen.

310

— They were all alone as few we know are alone.
They made a small, bustling noise in an empty land
But there were times when their voices seemed faint to them
Against the enormous stillness, the beast-tracked forest,

315

288. ought: anything. 301. Zion: the heavenly city of God.

The little, careless, slapping sound of the waves
 Against the *Mayflower's* side, and the east wind whining. 320
 They could labor and strive but the silence still was silence.
 The ship to succor them would not sail for months.
 The cold stars above them were as near as England.
 They might all die, every one.
 Die, and the *Mayflower* rot at her anchorage 325
 And the sea-birds walk on her decks, and the crabs scuttle
 And still, for many months, it would not be known.
 That was what they faced. That was what they knew might be.
 That was the question by silence and the loneliness.
 Listen. Listen at night. And if you hear any sound, 330
 I do not care how little but any sound
 That is not your own breathing,
 If you look from your window and see any light not yours,
 You cannot even approach their loneliness.

So, at last, they got the *Mayflower* to Plymouth, 335
 And Mary Allerton labored and bore her child,
 But it was a son, stillborn.

There is no time to grieve now, there is no time.
There is only time for the labor in the cold,
As we build the city of Zion, in the cold. 340
As we cast the lots for the houses, plan the street,
On the hill's slope, where the Indian cornfield grew,
For there, God be thanked, is cleared ground.

And, a furlong away,
There is still the forest, there is the endless forest,
And we build, and as we build, 345
We stand between forest and sea as between two paws.

For Greater Appreciation

1. "In the House of the Wild Wood" lets you know the kind of people who crossed the Atlantic on the *Mayflower* in 1620. Notice how Benét takes time to identify some of them by name; the device helps make the Pilgrims real. By what other means does the poet succeed in showing that "there were human beings aboard the *Mayflower*, not merely ancestors"? Which character comes most alive for you? Two brief references are made to William Bradford (lines 167-168 and 310-313). What kind of man does he seem to be?

2. Not only does the poem present people, it shows us the land they encountered. Lines

251-253 help to create a sense of the loneliness, awe, and terror that a wild land must have inspired. Of the many similar passages describing the appearance and sounds of the wilderness, point out the one that seems most vivid and effective to you.

3. The wilderness was not quite empty; a Somebody was there. Who was that Somebody? What had diminished the threat from the Somebody before the Pilgrims arrived?

4. The Pilgrims came to the New World to worship as they chose. In fact, they were less interested in this world than in the next. What evidences of their religious preoccupations does this selection reveal?