Anne Bradstreet

Brief life of a pioneer poet: 1612-1672

by CHARLOTTE GORDON

Anne Bradstreet's poem "To My Dear and Loving Husband," a favorite at weddings, is one of the most anthologized examples of early American verse. But few realize its author was also an extraordinarily courageous woman whose spirit and faith helped shape the America we know today.

Bradstreet was only 18 when she arrived in Salem harbor in 1630 on the Arbella. She had been reluctant to say goodbye to her elegant home in England, but her husband, Simon, and stern father, Thomas Dudley, were determined to leave a country whose government was increasingly hostile to critics of the Anglican Church. Later in life, when she wrote that her "heart rose" as she set foot in America, she meant not that she rejoiced, but that she retched.

Not surprisingly, she was horrified by the harshness of the New World: the "hungry wolves," "stormy rains," and "rugged stones" that she would one day describe in her poetry. Few Englishwomen, and even fewer Englishwomen, had ventured to America. When the Arbella's party disembarked, they discovered that the little band of settlers sent to Salem the year before to prepare for the rest of the colonists had been almost obliterated by disease and starvation. The leaders of Bradstreet's group, including her father, husband, and the colony's future governor, John Winthrop, took one look at the miserable little settlement and headed south.

While Winthrop crossed the Mystic River, settling on the hilly peninsula the Puritans called Boston (after the Lincolnshire town of the same name that gave the settlement its name), Dudley led his family and a few others to a "spacious plain" near the Charles River where they founded a tiny village originally known as New Towne. The Bradstreets built their first of many new homes across from the cow pasture. Six years later, the site became "the yard" for the colony's first college.

That initial winter in America would later be called "the starving time." Two hundred of the thousand or so emigrants died, and another 200 streamed back to England. Bradstreet, only recently arrived, took one look at the miserable little settlement and headed south.

In 1630 The Tenth Muse Lately Sprung Up in America appeared in the bookstalls of London. It was an astonishing success. Bradstreet became renowned for her writing and her piety, viewed as an icon of feminine virtue: an image fostered by her language of self-abnegation. Instead of seeking the "bays" of male literary fame, she created strong female characters who debated serious issues. Her poem "A Dialogue between Old England and New" (1642) is the first to declare New England's superiority, describing Old England as a "wailing," "trodden down" land and New England as a "spacious plain" near the Charles River where they founded a tiny outpost named Ipswich.

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An imagined, modern portrait of Bradstreet from Saint Botolph's Church in Boston, Lincolnshire, near the poet's childhood home.