

# 300 YEARS OF 'PROGRESS'

## A tribute to mark tercentenary of publication of Bunyan's masterpiece

A MODERN political prisoner would not be as lucky as John Bunyan was. Despite all the miseries of a seventeenth-century gaol — cold, damp, vermin, the close proximity of the mad and the criminal, disease, and contaminated food — yet he was permitted pen and paper and the leisure in which to write; and write he did, sermon after sermon, an autobiography, and the first magnificent part of *The Pilgrim's Progress*. (The second part, written at the end of his life, is equally magni-

ficent, though in a very different way that is marvellously revealing of Bunyan's spiritual and human development; but more of that later.)

by MONICA FURLONG

The idea for *The Pilgrim's Progress* came to Bunyan when he was in the middle of another book, though which one is not known. At first he thought he might incorporate it in that original book, but gradually the new work took on a momentum of its own. As Bunyan began his allegory about the pilgrim he had an experience most artists know occasionally, in the intervals of enormous labour and effort: that of creating almost without trying.

In more than twenty things, which I set down;  
This done, I twenty more had in my crown,  
And they again began to multiply,  
Like sparks that from the coals of Fire do flie.  
Nay then, thought I, if that you breed so fast,  
I'll put you by your selves, lest you at last  
Should prove ad infinitum, and eat out  
The Book that I already am about.

So with great speed, and "with delight," as he says, he wrote his book, comparing his method to

that of the spinner who has only to pull the wool steadily to make the thread. Shyly, if Bunyan ever did anything shyly, he showed it to his friends and asked their opinion about publication. They were very divided.

Some said, John, print it; others said, Not so:  
Some said, It might do good; others said, No.

It was not surprising that they had their doubts. The Puritan tradition, priding itself on its realistic approach to life, was deeply suspicious of anything reminiscent of "fiction," feeling it to be a kind of lie that encouraged men to live in a fantasy world. But, even without that difficulty, it was a work of such blazing originality for its time that it might have deceived far more sophisticated literary critics than Bunyan's friends.

### Few books

Insofar as it had precursors in English literature it was in the "emblem" books, woodenly allegorical works of an improving kind; or in the old folk-tales, common to all cultures, in which the lone hero went out to seek his fortune. But, with the exception of *Piers Plowman*, the imaginative force of the folk-tale had not been applied in English to a specifically religious theme; within the Puritan tradition, books on spiritual matters tended to be extraordinarily ponderous and dull.

Bunyan, who, as he said at one of his legal examinations, felt he was called to "the poor and simple," must have been acutely aware of how little interesting reading was available for the poorly educated. There was the Bible, read with passionate enthusiasm, sometimes by those who had learned to read in adult life for this very purpose; there were simple catechisms; there was Foxe's Book of Martyrs and Clark's Martyrology, the sales of which probably owed more to the ghoulish woodcuts of torture than to deep spirituality, but painfully little besides.

One best-seller was *The Plaine Man's Pathway to Heaven*, by Arthur Dent, which had come out first in 1601 and gone into numerous editions. Bunyan's first wife had brought a copy of it with her when she married Bunyan, and the two of them had read it together. I believe that the artist in Bunyan rebelled at its humourless piety and its tedious didacticism, and that Dent's plain man, transmuted by the alchemy of genius, emerged as the gold of Bunyan's pilgrim.

### Salty sayings

There was a strong whiff of the folk-tale in Bunyan's style—as he says in one of his sermons, he had spent his youth reading adventure stories and liked them much better than "improving" literature; but in addition to that he had a great feeling for character, a marvellous, sinewy prose that excelled in describing states of exaltation, a sharp wit (read the description of the jury at Vanity Fair), and a deep feeling for the common life of England which emerges in metaphor after metaphor.

And, as if those were not gifts enough for any writer, he had the special gift of his peasant background—a collection of shrewd and salty sayings of the kind one still sometimes hears emerging new-minted from the lips of country people or of Cockneys. No wonder he could do better than Arthur Dent.

Bunyan, or his publisher, must have had doubts about *The Pilgrim's Progress*, however, because it was six years after he was released from prison that the book came out, published by Nathaniel Ponder, of the Poultry, at Cornhill, at 18d. Perhaps Bunyan feared drawing attention to himself, and wanted only to live a normal life again after so many years in prison, to devote himself to his family and to the Bedford Meeting, of which he had become pastor.

But, partly perhaps because Bunyan had by then become something of a folk-hero himself as well as because of the book's intrinsic merit when it was published in 1678 the book was an immediate success. Bunyan relates, with a touch of mild snobbery, that it attracted the gentlefolk as much as the uneducated poor, that it was well received in France and Holland and New England, and even enjoyed by England's difficult neighbours.

Highlanders and Wild Irish can agree,  
My Pilgrim should familiar with them be.

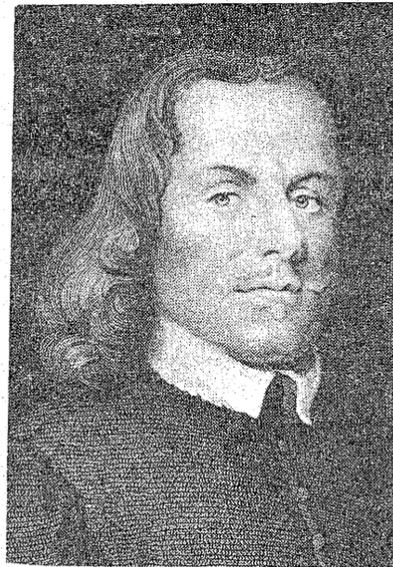
Perhaps most flattering of all, if annoying, the book was extensively pirated. Fame can go no further.

What was it about the subject-matter that so seized the imagination of Bunyan's generation? The ancient theme of the hero is a compulsive one; and, at a time when so many uneducated people were trying to "come of age" in the faith, to think and understand for themselves, the blend of fairy-tale and Christian message was a happy one. Apart from the overt Christian teaching in the book, there is a sense in which all quest stories are about religious experience and all heroes are describing the struggles of the man of faith — Odysseus and Jason just as much as Bunyan's pilgrim.

The themes are universal and archetypal — the painful setting

out from home, leaving the wife/mother behind; the discovery of friends and allies; the fight with the monster; the temptations to shortcuts and seductions which weaken resolve; the encounter with naked violence, with ridicule and contempt, with despair; the prison which has to be escaped from; and the maiden or maidens who offer hope and inspiration.

Many set out; but only the hero, covered in wounds, totally aware (towards the end of the journey)



John Bunyan (1628-88). Tomorrow marks the three hundredth anniversary of the publication of the first part of his "The Pilgrim's Progress"

of his own frailty and dependence on others, refusing to give up or go back, finishes the course, faithful to the truth and the vision

Bunyan certainly knew what he was talking about, since his own life had been painfully shaped by his religious vision. When he returned from the Civil War and set up as a tinker, at the age of nineteen, he had had no particular religion; but he had married a religious girl who got him into the habit of going to church on a Sunday, and for a time he had felt a kind of adolescent fascination for church, clergyman and ritual. He had been a naughty boy, famous in the district for his bad language; and the only way religion had penetrated his mind hitherto had been in terrible dreams of damnation which in childhood made him wake sweating and trembling with fear.

### Old terrors

Unexpectedly, as a result of a sermon he heard preached in Elstow church, his old terrors of hellfire returned, and he fell into a neurotic state in which he thought the bells or the steeple might fall on him, and gradually gave up one pleasure after another in a desperate attempt to please God. Over several years his mental state grew worse and worse until what would probably be diagnosed today as a paranoid psychosis overtook him, and he began to hear voices calling, whispering terrible suggestions and blasphemies, and to think that the Devil was standing behind him as he prayed, plucking at his clothes.

Yet he opposed this inner onslaught with a mighty sanity, feeling himself terribly torn by the conflict; and very gradually he found himself helped — by the

eleven men and women of the Bedford Meeting who met together for reading and preaching, by beginning to discover his own gift as a preacher, and above all by a spiritual "father," John Gifford, who listened for hours to the tale of torment and, like Evangelist, pointed the way to the Cross where Bunyan/Christian was to be reborn.

The extraordinary joy of which Bunyan writes of the conversion experience has rarely been matched: "He looked therefore, and looked again, even till the springs that were in his head sent the waters down his cheeks. Christian gave three leaps for joy and went on singing."

But the healing was not the end, but the beginning, of his journey, as almost at once he was charged under the Elizabethan Act that preceded the Act of Uniformity for having "perniciously abstained from coming to church to hear divine service" (Bunyan had by then abandoned the parish church for the Bedford Meeting), and for being "a common upholder of unlawful meetings and conventicles." He was thrown into prison.

### Miscarriage

The agony of that experience is not difficult to imagine. It began with a tragic miscarriage for his wife, Elizabeth, a young girl trying to care for the four children of Bunyan's first marriage and suddenly deprived of husband and breadwinner; with the threat that he might be transported and their home sold to pay her husband's fare into slavery. Bunyan was a devoted husband and father, and suffered terrible misgivings about what he was doing for conscience sake.

The frustration of this strong, active man, accustomed to walk for hours in the open air, must have been acute; and it was only gradually, as hopes of an early release faded and his endless schemes to persuade the authorities to let him go came to nothing, that he settled to the misery of prison, working with his hands to earn a little money for his children, preaching in the prison, playing the flute, reading, and above all writing. Prison turned John Bunyan into an inspired preacher with a gift for words into an artist and genius of the first rank.

When he came out in 1672 he at once became pastor of the Bedford Meeting and renewed his preaching activities. Elizabeth bore him two children, Sarah and Joseph, and he continued in his work as a writer, not always as happily as in the *Progress*.

The second book of the *Progress*, published in 1684 shows in my view a profound human development. There is a new note of compassion for human frailty for those who are not heroes; there is humour, an ability to see the complexity of truth; and a deep enjoyment of simple human pleasures — dancing, making merry — which had filled the young Bunyan with morbid scruples.

Above all, and most movingly, there is a sustained appreciation of women — the women who courageously stayed with Christ and supported him when his male friends had fled in terror; the

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Monica Furlong is the author of "Puritan's Progress," a study of John Bunyan, published in 1975.

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