

A NOTE ON THE PUBLICATION DATES OF
CHRISTOPHER LEVETT'S

A VOYAGE INTO NEW ENGLAND

Christopher Levett's *A Voyage into New England* is a well known narrative and promotional argument for colonization, and it has frequently been cited by modern scholars.¹ Its composition and publishing history have, however, been treated in misleading fashion. The most substantial study of Levett is the indispensable account of James Phinney Baxter which indicates that the tract was written and published in 1628.² There was indeed an edition in 1628, and the circumstances surrounding its publication are clear enough. Levett was the beneficiary of an extraordinary proclamation issued by Charles I in February 1628 calling on the ecclesiastical authorities to take up a collection for the maintenance of the plantation in New England; the monies were to be paid to Levett who was, by the same proclamation, appointed governor.³ The publication of Levett's account at this juncture was clearly designed to stimulate support for the collection which was being undertaken at a most inauspicious moment. By 1628, public resistance to levies called for by the king, voluntary or otherwise, had reached a considerable level. The association of the Duke of Buckingham with the scheme would have further eroded its popularity, while the Council for New England, under whose charter Levett held his land grant in Casco Bay, had been the target of a withering attack in parliament as a monopoly. The need to publish a personal vindication of the New England scheme in 1628 was obvious and overwhelming.

But in fact the tract was not written in 1628, nor was it first published then. The 1628 edition was a reissue of a work that had originally been published four years earlier. A copy of the earlier edition survives in the British library and gives on its title page a date of publication of August 21, 1624.⁴ Levett's account had clearly been written either on his voyage home from New England or immediately after his return. It would have been odd if Levett, who had come back to England to seek further support for his venture, had waited four years to publish any account of what had transpired. The realization that

the tract was indeed published in 1624 may, moreover, help to explain several odd features of the text. In the first place, one of the men to whom the work was dedicated was Sir John Ramsay, Earl of Holderness; Ramsay died in February 1626, being buried in Westminster Abbey on the 28th of that month.⁵ It would have been most peculiar to dedicate a work to a man who had already been dead for two years, and even more peculiar to address him in that dedication as if he were still alive. In the second place, there is a curious discrepancy between the king's proclamation and the thrust of Levett's argument in the tract which points to the fact that the tract was not specially written to supplement the proclamation. The proclamation made a considerable point of the propagation of the gospel and the conversion of the Indians, an argument that was appropriate in an appeal directed to church authorities.⁶ Levett, on the other hand, expressed reservations about the feasibility of conversion: "I have had much conference with the savages about our only true God, and have done my best to bring them to know and acknowledge him, but I fear me all the labor that way will be lost, and no good will be done, except it be among the younger sort."⁷ In the third place, it is clear from Levett's correspondence that he had received by November 1627 information about conditions in Casco Bay from one of the men he had left behind there in 1624.⁸ That information was important in the presentation of his case to the King and the Privy Council in 1627-1628, yet there is no reference to it in the text of the tract. Finally, there is the curious fact that there was no chapter four in the tract, though one was indicated in the table of contents, and it is perfectly clear in the text where it should commence, as the argument switches from a discussion of the Indians to a description of the land.⁹ This error can probably be explained by the haste with which the tract was published in 1624; it seems unlikely that it would have occurred if the work had been four years in the making.

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FOOTNOTES

¹It figures prominently, for example, in H. M. Jones, "The Colonial Impulse: An Analysis of the 'Promotion' Literature of Colonization," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, vol. 90 (1946), pp. 131-161. There are also a number of references to it in the recently published study by David Cressy, *Coming Over: Migration and Communication between England and New England in the Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge, 1987).

²J. P. Baxter, *Christopher Levett of York: The Pioneer Colonist in Casco Bay* (Portland, 1893), p. 71. A. W. Pollard and G. R. Redgrave, *A Short Title Catalogue of Books Printed in England, Scotland and Ireland and of English Books Printed Abroad 1475-1640* (London, 1963), p. 351, likewise lists only the 1628 edition.

³*Calendar of State Papers Colonial 1574-1660*, p. 87. The full text of the proclamation is printed in Baxter, *Christopher Levett*, pp. 68-71.

⁴British Library, C. 132 L. 20 (1), title page.

⁵*Dictionary of National Biography*, Ramsay, Sir John.

⁶Baxter, *Christopher Levett*, p. 69.

⁷*Ibid.*, p. 115.

⁸Christopher Levett to Sir John Coke, November 17, 1627, printed *ibid.*, p. 63.

⁹*Ibid.*, p. 119, paragraph beginning "And to say something of the country"