Two Centuries

Edith Austin Holton

This poem was written for the Two Hundredth Anniversary of the First Congregational Church, Falmouth, Massachusetts, 1908.

Two centuries’ winter storms have lashed
   The changing sands of Falmouth’s shore,
Deep-voiced, the winds, swift-winged, wild,
   Have echoed there the ocean’s roar.
But though the north-east gale unleashed,
   Rage-blind with power, relentless beat,
The sturdy light-house sheds its beam
   On waves churned white beneath the sleet.

And still when cold and fear are past,
   And fields are sweet with spring-time showers,
Mystic, the gray age-silent hills
   Breathe out their souls in fair mayflowers.
And where the tawny saltmarsh lies
   Beyond the sand dunes’ farthest reach,
The undulous grass grown russet green,
   Skirts the white crescent of the beach.

Above the tall elms’ green-plumed tops,
   Etched against low-hung, gray-hued skies,
Straight as the heaven-kissing pine,
   The home-bound mariner descries
The goodly spire of the old first church,
   Reverend, serene, with old-time grace,
Symbol and sign of an inner life
   Deep-sealed by time’s slow carven trace.

Out of that church in days long gone
   Went a stalwart, true-eyed sturdy band,
Sons of the mist and the flying foam,
   The blood and brawn of a Pilgrim land;
Down to the sea where the tall masts rose,
    Where the green-mossed black hulls rose and fell,
And the cables strained at the call of the tide,
    For they knew and heeded its summons well.

The farewell sung in the bearded throats,
    As their wave-spurred mersteed tossed the foam,
But they fixed their eyes on the fading spire,
    And thought of the cheering welcome home
When the long voyage once again should end,
    For they knew, in the good, time honored way,
Their townsmen knelt in the ancient church,
    And prayed, "God haste the returning day."

They heard the voice of the well known bell,
    Borne on the salt wind, strong and free,
"Well guard well, O sister bell,
    My loyal sons upon the sea."
And clearer, sweeter, mellower yet,
    Where the white-capped surge is deep and slow,
Came the answering call from the buoy float,
    "Still, still, trust still, I know."

Such were the men of the long ago,
    Who after storm, at anchor ride,
Safe moored by the bourn of setting sun,
    On the sky-deep sea that knows no tide.
Whose sons though now upon the deep,
    They sail no more as their fathers sailed,
Still keep the faith that their fathers held
    Where the light of the old shrine never failed.

And constant still, in their fathers' church,
    Say as they bow on bended knee,
"O Pilot of our souls, guard well
    All those who drift upon the sea."
A reverent hush, then zephyr borne,
    A message fair as the after glow,
Like the voiceless song of the evening star,
    "Still, still, trust still, I know."