The Role of Refugees in the History of American Science

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Since the time of the earliest settlements the flight of refugees from Europe has been a most potent factor in the development of American science. These migrations, which resulted from religious persecution, desire to escape imprisonment or military service, curtailment of political liberties, longing for a more congenial social environment and other causes, have come generally in successive waves of disturbance in which all sorts and conditions of men were affected. While the families of peasants and workmen were chiefly involved in these movements, merchants, physicians, scholars, artists and other groups were also concerned.

1 The biographical notes on the refugee scientists mentioned in the present sketch were culled from various biographical cyclopedias. The new Dictionary of American Biography with its classified index of celebrities according to occupation and place of birth was found to be especially helpful.

The list of European men of science, who from time to time have sought in America refuge from persecution, is a long one and the stories of their adventurous careers would fill a volume of considerable size. In the present paper a few typical illustrations will be cited from the list of scientists who fled to America in the disturbances of the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

The earliest conspicuous example of an American refugee scientist is that of John Winthrop, Jr. (1606-1676), who in 1631, because of the persecution of the Puritans in England under Archbishop Laud, joined his father and other coreligionists in the founding of the Bay Colony in New England. "Laud's hand fell heavily on the English Puritans," writes J. R. Green, the eminent English historian. "Thousands of the best scholars, merchants, lawyers, farmers, were flying..."