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The "Self-righteous" and the "Savages"

A study of Puritan immigration of the 1620s-80s and their encounter with Native Americans

Following the Reformation upheaval created in Europe by Martin Luther in the 16th century, many Protestants sought religious freedom and spiritual toleration that was not present within the Church located in Europe and England. Longing for the total freedom to worship as they felt compelled, the Puritans traversed the Atlantic Ocean to the New World. This highly anticipated New World carried the hopes and curiosities of the immigrants whose unrealistic expectations could do nothing short of leave them disappointed at the hardships to be faced in what would come to be known as America. One such hardship was found by inhabiting a land that belonged to another group of people, Native Americans.

The land that Puritans came to occupy was not altogether vacant. Even though King James of England had granted them the land, there were natives living on that region. Beyond the struggle to take the land that they had been granted, there were even greater disappointments to be found in the hardship of working the land. The disappointment came from being misinformed about the glimpses of paradise given by the writings of travelers who settled in the Caribbean and Guiana. Thus, "some considered, guiding their course toward the fertile islands of the Caribbean as described glowingly by Captain Bell;"[1] however, few actually did venture that far south.

The coming of the settlers to America brought a new culture and religion, among other things, to the native inhabitants of the land. One of the most common and unappreciated gifts that the settlers unintentionally brought to the natives was disease. The Puritans had built a strong immunity to many of the diseases that the Indians had never encountered; yet the Indians had little hope of avoiding the sickness. William Bradford of Plymouth described one such encounter, "the Indians living near the trading house fell sick of small pox, and died most miserably." His descriptions went into sickening details of how the disease affected their bodies, and how they died like "rotten sheep." He went on to write in his diary: "For it pleased God to visit these Indians with a great sickness and such a mortality that of a thousand, above nine and a half hundred of them died, and many of them did rot above ground for want of a burial." The colonists saw these deaths of the natives as reassurance from God that they were free to occupy the vacant lands of the former native tribes.[2]

Beyond the imperialist style of land-take over that was facilitated by the spreading of unseen pathogens, the Puritans had some positive interactions with natives; however, there seemed to be something lacking even in those interactions. There was a lack of cultural understanding between the two groups of people, which served as the primary barrier to the relationship between the natives and the Puritan settlers. Preconceived notions about the natives did not help matters either. Condescendingly, what came to be known as "Indianized," according to Cotton Mather, meant to "serve the devil."[3] The high sense of self-righteousness of the Puritans led many of them to look down on the natives simply as being heathen savages and, in many ways, less than themselves.

The reason that the colonists were able to come to America was because of the Virginia Company, who had allowed the Pilgrims, "separatists," to settle in the Northern part of the

Virginia Territory, by charter of King James of England. The settlers proclaimed a united "Civil Body Politik," colonial governing system, within their colony through the *Mayflower Compact* of 1620. In this proclamation, they stated their purpose to be "for the glory of God, the Advancement of the Christian Faith, and the Honour of [their] King and Country," by establishing the first permanent settlement in the northern parts of the Virginia Territory.[4]

After his arrival in 1631 to the Massachusetts Bay Colony, Roger Williams, began to learn the native languages of many tribes; Algonquin, Showatuck, Nipmuck, Narragansett and many others in order to evangelize and thus serve the proclamation, in part.[5] Originally, Williams' reason for coming to America was a "longing after natives' soules."[6] This compassion for reaching others for Jesus Christ weighed heavily on his conscience concerning how the Puritans had conducted themselves in their take-over of native lands. Eventually, becoming a separatist who pushed for severing ties with the Church of England, Williams soon found himself at odds with Winthrop and the other magistrates who sought a less radical approach to their "oligarchy." This growing dissension was brought to the surface when Williams challenged the premise that the colonists had any rights to the land they occupied. Williams declared that the King of England had no authority to give the land to the Massachusetts Bay Company, citing that the King's authority rested on "a solemn public lie." He further accused the King of blasphemy for referring to Europe as Christendom and reserved for him such uncomplimentary statements as those found in the book of Revelation.[7]

Williams made further arguments to the Puritan leadership concluding, "Puritans had no right to deny Indians their own religions, Divine or secular." He even felt that the Puritan leadership was out of line by using the Church to govern the land. The leadership therefore sought to "transfer Williams from pulpit to pulpit," yet became quite alarmed at how quickly he

gained followers, especially natives. Williams quickly established a "great friendship"[8] with the leader of the Wampanoags, Massoit, and the Narragonsett, Canonicus. While Massoit and Canonicus were alive, their tribes enjoyed very friendly, pleasant relationships with the colonists.[9]

Due to Williams' irritation with the Puritans over the insistence upon oaths of membership to the church as criteria for colonial citizenship, Williams established his own colony of Providence in 1635. His relationship with natives provided a strong support for the establishment and sustainability of his colony, officially known as Rhode Island and the Providence Plantations.[10]

Williams once said of his loyal friends, "I've known them to leave their house and mat to lodge a friend or stranger; when Jews and Christians oft have sent Jesus Christ to the Manger. Oft have I heard these Indians say, 'these English will deliver us of all that's ours, our lands and lives; in the end, they'll bereave us.'"[11]

Even though Williams enjoyed a close relationship with natives, this did not mean that all settlers coming from Europe did. For instance, in the colony at Plymouth in 1620, William Bradford's group came across Wampanoags when they first landed upon the shore. Initially the landing party, led by Captain Miles Standish, encountered strange creatures in the woods at night and fired shots into the woods to kill the suspected "wolves." The next morning, they saw a native creature shooting arrows back at them. Yet, when the first representative of the natives, Samoset, came forth boldly to speak to the settlers in "broken English," there was some ease to the tension that was mounting between the settlers and the natives. The reason that Samoset knew some of the English language was because of a fellow native named Squanto, who had

been exposed to it while in England some years before. Squanto had managed to teach many of the English how to plant their corn, clean their fish and preserve their commodities.

Since many of the English had considered Squanto as a gift from God, they were willing to listen to another native, Samoset, who clearly knew more about them than they knew about him. Thanks to Samoset's ability to communicate with the English settlers, a treaty was signed between the Plymouth colony and the Massoit. This pact, initiated by the natives themselves, displayed a level of fairness and equality because it lasted through the lifetime of the great chief. This close relationship was later shared with Massoit by Williams' followers as well.[12]

The majority of natives were not particularly receptive to the settlers coming onto their lands, except for when they brought gifts to give and furs to trade. Along with the natives' initial hesitancy to accept the settlers in the Massachusetts Bay Colony, the Puritans themselves were not as gracious in their views of the natives either. In fact, Puritan leaders regarded the natives as a grave threat and described them as "fiery serpents in the Promised Land." This view, often preached in the pulpit, only brought about fear and disgust for the native peoples of the New World.[13]

In *A Different Mirror*, Ronald Takaki quoted William Wood of Boston, 1634, "Fettered with the chains of idleness, they would rather starve than work" (39). The Puritans viewed natives as lazy individuals who were sinfully wasting the resources that America had to offer. This type of thinking fostered further feelings of devaluation of the natives as some Puritans saw them as nothing more than "foxes and wild beasts that trample the grass." The main problem here was not that natives were wasting their land, but rather they did not have the same level of private ownership that the English-born settlers did. For most natives, only sought to use an area of land for as long as they needed it, then they allowed others to use it for other purposes.[14]

In an essay entitled *King Philip's Herds*, Virginia Anderson described, "Only those Indians who submitted to 'domestication' could live in the New England Canaan. They had to accept Christianity, of course; in addition, colonists insisted that they adopt English ways entirely, including the keeping of domestic animals."[15] This notion of raising livestock challenged the natives in many ways. The traditional role of women as agricultural hands would be altered in tremendous ways if women were needed to care for life-stock, thus changing the traditional gender-based division of labor.

Animal domesticity also challenged the spiritual beliefs and practices of the natives who considered the animals as equal shares in the usage of the forest, and never considered the creatures they killed to be inferior beings. Rather, the natives sought to please the spirits of the creatures in order that they themselves may have carcasses delivered unto them in order to sustain life. In order for successful killing, the natives had to know their creatures intimately while at the same time respecting their lives, and thus could not bow to the English system of making animals subjected, inferior creatures.[16]

Anderson further described, the problems that came with the English domesticity of animals. "Indians, who had never had to build fences to protect their fields, were unprepared for the onslaught. Even their underground storage pits proved vulnerable, as swine 'found a way to unhinge their barn doors and rob their garners,' prompting natives to block their pits with fallen trees." The hogs further attacked such resources as streams and watering holes, which were essential to the natives for agricultural purposes and personal survival.[17]

The English had developed a joint usage of land agreement, assuming that the natives would comply. Strict rules were imposed on the natives, citing that they could not trap in the limits of a town or near a livestock area, and that traps had to be checked daily in case the

settlers' livestock had been caught. The dual-usage did not protect the natives as much as it protected the English Puritans. Native lands in present-day Connecticut, were trampled by livestock without any restriction or enforcement being made against the settlers concerning their ravaging animals.[18]

Another account of interaction between the natives and settlers occurred after "King Philip's War." The wife of a Puritan minister, Mary Rowlandson in 1681, recorded an amazing personal account about her captivity with the Narragansett Indians. The Narragansett led by Metacom, "King Philip," sought to take back their land from the English settlers in what came to be known as "King Philip's War." The assault on the Puritans resulted in the capture of Rowlandson and her six-year-old daughter. Within days of their capture, Rowlandson's daughter died and she herself faced adverse conditions that led to her continual begging for food to eat. She learned to trade knitted goods and other items for food, during her 12-month captivity, in order survive the sometimes-harsh treatment.[19]

Rowlandson was immediately forced to be a maidservant to the sister-in-law of "King Philip," to which Rowlandson was quite disgusted and unhappy doing. Accompanying the traveling tribe, she ventured through the New England countryside by foot on nearly 20 journeys with the Narragansett, totaling nearly 150 miles. She was able to communicate with her captors, though she often refrained from speaking her mind because "so unstable and like mad men they were." Eventually coming before a governing council, the Saggamores, she was asked what her husband might offer to them for the redemption of his wife. Upon hearing that Mr. Rowlandson would give twenty pounds, a letter was quickly sent to Boston instructing him to come get his wife.[20]

Some time during her captivity, Rowlandson wrote, “in my travels an Indian came to me, and told me, if I were willing, he and his Squaw would run away, and go home along with me: I told him No: I was not willing to run away, but desired to wait God’s time, that I might go home quietly, and without fear. And now God hath granted my desire [to return home].” She continuously struggled to ponder the will of God and how the He could care for such “murderous savages” who “feared neither God, nor Man, nor the Devil.” Before concluding her account with “I speak in the presence of God, and to his glory,” she did commend the Indians’ behavior citing that not even once, did she receive the “least abuse of chastity” from any of them. Her captivity account was published and endured nearly 30 editions throughout the New England region. [21]

There were many accounts of tension between the natives and their counterparts, the vast array of European settlers, primarily English and Scottish. From studying the views held by the Puritan leadership, it is no wonder that the continuous dehumanization and arrogant claim to non-vacant land led to constant conflict and a push for removing savages from their land; either directly or indirectly. Increase Matter even blamed the Indians for their aggression toward the English, “[They] were so Devil driven as to begin an unjust and bloody war upon the English, which issued in their speedy and utter extirpation from the face of God’s earth.”[22]

Such views gave the English a sense of innocence within themselves along with a justification for their hatred and disgust toward the savages whose land they had taken. Cotton Mather suggested, “The Devil decoyed those miserable savages [to New England] in hopes that the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ would never come here to destroy or disturb His absolute empire over them.”[23] This philosophy transmitted itself into the Puritan view of the savages being unworthy of God, and according to Increase Mather was translated into an unworthiness to live alongside the colonists in harmony without adapting their cultural heritage. For when the

natives refused to change their lifestyle and customs, the Puritans sought to ignore them or even destroy them, but only in the name of God, of course. The religious freedom that the Puritans had sought was now becoming their own vice—squeezing the lives of another people, the Indians whose land they had stolen.

Not only was there a sense of self-righteousness over the natives, but the Puritans also tended to have strict regulations that often found even their own followers in persecution and utter excommunication. Many of the fears that were held by the Puritans in regard to the Indians were because of the characteristics that were embraced by the natives. Examples of this behavior, seen as personifications of the Devil himself, included: sexuality, the body, laziness, sin and a total loss of self-control. It was not as much a matter of the Puritans preaching Christ crucified in hopes of saving the savages, as it was the Puritan way of forcing a lifestyle change of being hard-working, discreet about sexuality and the body, and considering sin and self-control as very serious issues. They sought to change the lifestyle before changing the heart. This stringent system of legalism caused great conflicts within the Puritan people, as well as infecting their system of evangelism.[24]

The Puritans came to America seeking new life and the freedom to worship, as they felt compelled. Yet, for them, having new life meant taking over the lives and lands of those already inhabiting the Promised Land. They became the "Church of England" to the natives, in that they were not tolerant of the native beliefs and customs, just as the Church in Europe and England was not tolerant of Puritan factions that were drifting around that continent. The Puritans sought to spread their way of life, Christianity, yet they only brought disease and bloodshed to most of natives that were encountered. In such cases as Roger Williams and the previous establishment of Bradford's Plymouth Colony, peaceful relationships did exist with the native tribes. Yet, in

the long-run, peace could not prevail, as conflicts arose over land disputes, crop damages, and belief systems led to the declining peace between the colonists and natives. The future course of America was set by the beginning foundation, of arrogant greed, that led to the near extermination of Native Americans as a whole; and total extermination of many tribes in part. In essence, the Europeans did destroy and uproot the very people whom they sought to replace. Such self-righteousness led the Puritans, and those similar to them, on a misguided path to a tragic lives of being out of touch with reality, and their own doctrine from God concerning the souls and lives of their fellow man, the savages of North America. Even amongst the positive arguments of the Puritan migration, it is quite unfortunately that the negative impacts can still be felt today by the descendants of those who suffered the loss of their lands and their heritage.

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[14] Katherine Tinsley, Race, Ethnicity, and Gender in American History Lecture Notes
[15] Virginia DeJohn Anderson, "King Philip's Herds: Indians, Colonists, and the Problem of Livestock in Early New England," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d Ser., 51, October 1994, 601-24. Reprinted: Roger Nichols, *The American Indian: Past and Present*, (Boston: McGraw Hill, 1999), p. 24
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[17] Anderson as cited in Nichols, 25-6
[18] Anderson as cited in Nichols, 26-7
[19] Nancy Woloch, *Early American Women: A Documentary History, 1600-1900*, (Boston: McGraw Hill, 2002) p. 14

[20] Mary Rowlandson, *A New England Captivity* as cited by Woloch, p. 15-17
[21] Rowlandson, as cited by Woloch, p. 17, 19
[22] Takaki, 43
[23] Takaki, 43
[24] Takaki, 43