

THE TRUTH
ABOUT STORIES

A Native Narrative

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Living together would be another matter, and, as exploration gave way to settlement, the European reaction to Indians hardened, and the language used to describe Indians intensified. Particularly among the English. While the Spanish depended on Indians as a slave labour force to work the mines and plantations in New Spain, the British and the French depended on the Indians as partners in the fur trade, and then as an adjunct mercenary force so they could fight each other, and later, of course, the Americans. But apart from these specific roles, none of these nations had much use for Indians.

This was particularly true of the Puritans in New England, who had brought with them a religion that was

militaristic in nature and a theory of land acquisition and usage that was individualistic and private. Thanksgiving and corn-planting techniques aside, Indians were, most often, seen as impediments to progress and affronts to faith.

You might be wondering why I'm about to use an American example to discuss early Native-non-Native relations instead of a good Canadian example. I could say that it's because I'd prefer to put the Americans on the spot and pretend that Canadians treated Indians better. But that's not true. It's because I know the American example better, and because Americans started the process of eliminating Indians sooner and were more diligent about the project than were Canadians.

Don't worry, my partner, who is a staunch Canadian, has already had words with me about this rather lame bit of reasoning.

So the Puritans saw the world at war, a holy war, a war that was both philosophical and physical. Philosophically, God and the Devil were engaged in a spiritual battle for the souls of humans. Humans, in turn, fought a physical battle that pitted God's troops, in this case the Puritans, against the Devil's mercenaries. While they were in England, the Puritans had seen the manifestations of the Devil in the pomp of the Catholic church and in the impurity of the Anglican order. Transplanting themselves to America did not take them out of the battle. It simply pitted them against an old enemy in a new guise.

Land, on the other hand, was a godsend, satisfying two needs for the Puritans. First, it provided them the

space in which to establish a community, something they had not had in land-poor England. Second, it provided settlers with enough room to isolate their community, so that the worldly influences that had plagued them in England could be walled out, and the forces of darkness and the wilderness could be kept at bay.

Indians were seen as a threat both to the war effort and to the acquisition of land, and the Puritans set about creating the stories that were needed to carry the day. Indians, who had been imagined as strange and exotic in the halcyon days of exploration, were now seen, as the historian Douglas Edward Leach put it, a "graceless and savage people, dirty and slothful in their personal habits, treacherous in their relations with the superior race . . . fit only to be pushed aside and subordinated."⁵

William Morrell, in his terse verse history of New England, imagined Native people as dangerous. "They're wonderous cruel," he wrote, "Strangely base and vile/Quickly displeased, and hardly reconciled."⁶ Nathaniel Saltonstall, writing of King Philip's War in New England, 1675-76, likened Indians to wolves "and other beasts of prey that commonly do their mischiefs in the night or by stealth durst not come forth out of the woods and swamps where they lay skulking in small companies."⁷

And when they did come out of the woods and swamps, according to Benjamin Trumbull, they ate each other. Of a captive, Trumbull writes, "The Indians, kindling a large fire, violently tore him limb from limb. Barbarously cutting his flesh in pieces, they handed it

round from one to another, eating it, singing and dancing round the fire, in their violent and tumultuous manner."⁸

These descriptions, these historical propagandas, made their way into a great many historical fictions, the best of which is probably John Richardson's 1852 novel *Wau-Nan-Gee, or, The Massacre at Chicago*. In it, Richardson — a Canadian, for those of you who share my partner's nationalistic tendencies — describes a group of Potawatomies, led by the arch-villain Pee-to-tum, who have just attacked a wagon. It's a sparkling passage, full of the balance and sensitivity that marks the best of Hollywood westerns.

"Squatted in a circle, and within a few feet of the wagon in which the tomahawked children lay covered with blood, and fast stiffening in the coldness of death, now sat about twenty Indians, with Pee-to-tum at their head, passing from hand to hand the quivering heart of the slain man, whose eyes, straining as it were, from their sockets, seemed to watch the horrid repast in which they were indulging, while the blood streamed disgustingly over their chins and lips and trickled over their persons. So many wolves or tigers could not have torn away more voraciously with their teeth, or smacked their lips with greater delight in the relish of human food, than did these loathsome creatures who now moistened the nauseous repast from a black bottle of rum which had been found in one of the wagons containing the medicine for the sick — and what gave additional disgust was the hideous aspect of the inflamed eye of the Chippewa, from which the bandage had fallen off, and from which the heat of the

sun's rays was fast drawing a briny, ropy, and copious discharge, resembling rather the grey and slimy mucus of the toad than the tears of a human being."⁹

Yummy.

All that in two sentences.

Indians, it seemed, could offer little inspiration or example to civilized humans, and colonists saw little need to examine either the Indian or Indian culture. Indian government was a labyrinth, confused and indecipherable. Indian religion was absurd and ridiculous. Jonas Johannis Michaluis, in a letter to the Reverend Adrianus Smoutuis, summed up the feelings that most colonists had for Indians when he described them as "savage and wild, strangers to all decency, yea, uncivil and stupid as garden poles."¹⁰

"Stupid as garden poles." It's funny, isn't it? And a little annoying, too. But there's no point in being angry. These are just the sounds and smells of empire — fear, racism, greed, arrogance — and since empire tends to be exclusive, it makes sense, doesn't it, that Indians would not be welcome?