

SAN FRANCISCO PUBLIC LIBRARY



3 1223 08564 3717

MERCED

POCAHONTAS

and the

POWHATAN DILEMMA

"Townsend . . . writes
with a sharp sword
and a crackling whip."

—John Leonard,
Harper's Magazine

CAMILLA TOWNSEND





An engraving of John Smith based on a sketch taken from life. Published in Smith's *Description of New England*, 1616, and his *General Historie of Virginia*, 1624. (Simon Van de Passe, 1616, courtesy of the New York Public Library)

On some level they must have known conquest would not be as easy as they wanted it to be. In fact, their future relationship with the Indians was already a matter of hot debate.

After all, the enthusiastic proponents of colonization were only some of England's people. Many others opined that no good could come of all this—that the Crown was too poor to support such projects, that America's northern lands were useless, that the Spanish

would never let the colony survive if the lands in fact proved good, that past failures should teach them something. Many also argued that God would not look with favor on their dispossession of the Indians. Even Robert Gray, the same pastor who envisioned the colonists as the army of God, acknowledged: "The first objection [to colonization] is, by what right or warrant we can enter in the land of these Savages, take away their rightfull inheritance from them, and plant ourselves in their places, being unwronged or unprovoked by them."¹⁶

These words may startle people who assume that John Smith and his cohort lived in an era in which it never occurred to anyone that taking Indian land raised a moral issue. It is rare, though, that a great wrong is committed by one people against another without some among the perpetrators protesting the deed. Colonists made moral decisions, too. And some were adept at convincing themselves that whatever they wanted to do was indeed the right thing to do, whatever others might say.

How did they work it out for themselves? How did the pastor Robert Gray, for example, answer that question in his friends' drawing rooms, and then in his sermons? First, it is clear that nobody then envisioned eliminating the indigenous people. Up until at least 1620, as one historian has put it, "only madmen would have dreamed of extirpating the Indians."¹⁷ Sane men could not think of it. Who but the Indians would tell the settlers what they needed to know—about navigable rivers, food crops, water supplies, and the like? No, killing or removing the Indians was not even discussed. Rather, the central question turned on how the English might colonize the New World and harness the labor of the Indians without cruelly oppressing them. They had always sworn they would not become like the Spaniards. What now gave them the right to "take away the rightful inheritance" of the Indians, who had never "wronged" them? The answer lay in the belief that, rather than make slaves of the Indians, as the Spanish had supposedly done, the English would give them the *opportunity* to work, to pay taxes to the

commonweal, to become Christian, and to learn how to make the land more productive—so that they would ultimately be better off than they were before. The Indians were castigated at every turn for having failed to make the land yield more; they had thus forfeited their right to keep all of it. With English neighbors and landlords to show them the way, they would better manage the land left to them.¹⁸

The more elite members of the Virginia Company aboard the ships bound for America had literally been schooled in this notion. As early as 1516, even before the discovery of the Aztec kingdom, Sir Thomas More had rehearsed the idea in *Utopia*, and the work had been translated from Latin into English and oft-reprinted since. His fictional narrator was supposed to have sailed with Amerigo Vespucci—whose work was “now in print and abroad in every man’s hands.” In the idyllic society More’s narrator described, land was for those who worked it:

If so be that the multitude throughout the whole island pass and exceed the due number, then they choose out of every city certain citizens and build up a town under their own laws in the next land where the inhabitants have much waste and unoccupied ground, receiving also of the same country people to them if they will join and dwell with them. They thus joining and dwelling together do easily agree in one fashion of living, and that to the great wealth of both peoples. For they so bring the matter about by their laws that the ground, which before was neither good nor profitable for the one nor for the other, is now sufficient and fruitful enough for them both. But if the inhabitants of that land will not dwell with them to be ordered by their laws, then they drive them out of those bounds . . . And if they resist and rebel, then they make war against them, for they count this the most just cause of war, when any people holdeth a piece of ground void and vacant to no good nor profitable use.¹⁹

The unproductive use of land was not the only reason the English insisted colonization was justified. Starting in the 1580s, even serious English writers—not just the producers of lurid broadsides—claimed that the practice of human sacrifice existed in Virginia, even though no one had observed it firsthand. There is in fact no evidence that human sacrifice occurred there. The writers were probably inspired by their readings about the Aztecs, among whom the practice did exist, and they interpreted male initiation rites—about which they had heard fearful stories—as ceremonies of death. They wanted to believe that it occurred, for they could then save the Indians from themselves. Sir George Peckham, for example, published a description in 1583 of the idealized feudal society in which willing indigent serfs would not only benefit from their new knowledge of modern agriculture but would also abandon human sacrifice. “Over and beside the knowledge how to tyl and dresse their grounds, they shal be reduced from unseemly customs, to honest manners . . . Many of their poore innocent children shal be preserved from the bloody knife of the sacrificer, a most horrible and detestable custome in the sight of God and man, now and ever heretofore used amongst them.”²⁰ Peckham’s overarching theme was not that the natives were lost to all goodness, but rather, that they would be grateful once they had had the opportunity to mend their ways under English governance.

Almost every English commentator on the New World reiterated these themes; then in 1590 a book appeared that surpassed all others. It was more accurate and more widely circulated. The linguist and mathematician Thomas Harriot had returned from Roanoke with extensive notes and with some paintings done by John White—whose daughter and granddaughter would later disappear, along with the other settlers. Theodor de Bry published Harriot’s *A Brief and True Report of the New Found Land of Virginia*, including his own engravings based on White’s paintings. From a modern anthropological point of view, Harriot’s work is indeed useful. He learned some of the language and noted details as accurately as he knew how; he clearly re-

spected many of the people he met and understood that a lack of technology did not imply shortcomings in intelligence. His interpretation of Indian-white relations, however, ultimately served only to encourage the enthusiastic backers of colonization in their current perceptions:

[T]hey are a people poore, and for want of skill and judgement in the knowledge and use of our things, doe esteeme our trifles before things of greater value: Notwithstanding, in their proper maner (considering the want of such things as we have), they seeme very ingenious. For although they have no such tooles, nor any such crafts, Sciences and Artes as wee, yet in those things they doe, they shew excellence of wit. And by how much they upon due consideration shall finde our maner of knowledges and crafts to exceede theirs in perfection, and speede for doing or execution, by so much the more is it probable that they should desire our friendship and love, and have the greater respect for pleasing and obeying us. Whereby may bee hoped, if meanes of good government be used, that they may in short time bee brought to civilitie.²¹

Similarly, in the illustrations the ingenuity of the people was showcased—in their houses, fishing weirs, archery. De Bry showed them embracing English education: a young girl danced about, holding a powder horn in one hand and an armillary sphere, a small instructional globe, in the other. The English could not know then that their faith in this pleasant prediction of future relations would not last: a century later, when the settlers had become disgusted with the Indians' failure to comply with their dictates, the book's illustrations would be redone, and the child would be left holding an ear of corn and an Indian rattle. One historian has commented, "It is as if the English had initially been eager to place European objects in native hands, but later they were just as eager to take these things away."²²

In the meantime, however, Harriot's and de Bry's brand of arrogant optimism held sway and directly influenced the instructions given to the Virginia Company by King James:

Furthermore, our will and pleasure is, and wee doe hereby determine and ordaine, that every person and persons being our subjects of every the said Collonies and Plantations shall from time to time well entreate those salvages in those parts, and use all good meanes to draw the salvages and heathen people . . . to the true service and knowledge of God, and that all just, kind and charitable courses shall be holden with such of them, as shall conforme themselves to any good and sociable traffique and dealing with ye subjects of us, our heires and successors, which shall be planted there, whereby they may be ye sooner drawne to the true knowledge of God, and ye Obedience of us.²³

However, the possibility that the reality might well be more complicated was not ignored. About two weeks after the king's advisers released the instructions in his name, wealthy members of the Virginia Company presented the departing colonists with their own "Instructions by Way of Advice." They preached caution:

Let [your Soldiers] never trust the Country people with the carriage of their Weapons . . . And whensoever any of Yours Shoots before them be sure that they be Chosen out of your best Marksmen for if they See Your Learners miss what they aim at, they will think the Weapon not so terrible and thereby will be bould . . . to Assault you. Above all things do not advertise the killing of any of your men that the Country people may know it. If they perceive they are but Common men and that with the Loss of many of theirs they may Deminish any part of Yours they will make many Adventures upon You if the County be populous.²⁴

Some scholars have argued that these instructions were written by Hakluyt. They bear the imprint of someone who knew the history of the Spanish campaigns very well: the writer knew that although steel armor normally made European soldiers relatively invulnerable, it would not work if the country was "populous." That is, it could not help them withstand the onslaught of thousands of enemies who had decided they could afford to lose a few hundred in making a rush. This careful thinking about what to do and not to do in facing Indian enemies makes it clear that consciously or unconsciously the English colonists knew they might not be as welcome as they hoped.

They had other worries as well. As part of the evolving belief that the Indians would be only too glad to become literal and figurative tribute-payers to the English nation, contemporary scholars had worked out an interesting theory: the indigenous Americans, they claimed, were very much like the ancient Britons—who had themselves been civilized by the Romans. This theory was both condescending and yet at the same time beautifully unprejudiced. On the one hand, it justified the English insistence that they were superior in every regard at the present time; on the other, it acknowledged that there were no inherent differences between English and natives. The idea made some people distinctly nervous: if Indians could become just like Englishmen, then could not Englishmen also become just like Indians? Alone in the wilderness, who was to say the colonists would not become "savages"? Many dire warnings were issued. And later English boys, when left with Indians, often did indeed become Indians. One man would write, "While I yet remained there [in Powhatan's village], by great chance came an Englishman thither, almost three years before that time surprised [and taken prisoner] . . . one William Parker, grown so like both in complexion and habite to the Indians, that I only knew him by his tongue to be an Englishman."²⁵ To some, William Parker was an awful specter.